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Stone Child

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INTRODUCTION

I came to the personal essay by a roundabout path. An omnivorous reader as a child, if I did not have a book or newspaper handy, I would pore over the milk carton or the cereal box at the breakfast table. And although a painfully slow reader, I have never aspired to quicken my pace. I relish the taste of words, savoring the way they sound between the tongue and the palate of my mind. The delicious rhythms and the rhymes of thoughtfully crafted phrases, sentences, and paragraphs accentuate the pleasures of exploring personalities and the responsibilities of considering new ideas. A well-crafted sentence stimulates my emotions in exactly the same way that an exquisite ballet or painting or piano piece does. But words on paper have the added quality of being able to stir me to action. Words are affirming. Words are challenging. And although other genres or media of expression permit me to see the world through the author's or the narrator's eyes, the personal essay invites me to do so. Other genres may possess the same qualities to greater or lesser degrees; however, the

personal essay stands alone in its devotion to art, to intimacy, and to ideas.

I suppose that my informal introduction to the essay genre was David Piper's "I Am Well, Who Are You?" (*Esquire* 1965). At the time that I was reading Piper's essay, back in the late 80s, I certainly was not familiar enough with the essay and its various nephews and nieces to say in any informed way that I was reading a personal essay. Nonetheless, being entirely smitten with the author's intimate voice, and, to my taste, with how breathtakingly well he expressed himself, I made a copy of his essay and kept it in my files for years. Now that I have a more informed appreciation for the subgenre that I still find so appealing, Piper's essay has come out of my file cabinet to join better known but certainly not better examples of the quality of writing and human sentiment to be found in the personal essay.

In the *Esquire* essay, Piper, a British soldier, records his experience as a prisoner of war in a World War II Japanese prison camp and his painful repatriation into Western society. In an odd bit of irony, the man who recommended to me Piper's essay (a general officer in the Air Force and seven-year POW himself) had read it a few months prior to being shot down over Hanoi. As a result of my reading and his rereading the essay, we learned that we shared passions for grand experiences,

reflective thinking, and exquisite writing.

Needless to say, I was delighted to discover later on in graduate school that Piper's essay is not a unique phenomenon, that others before and since Piper have invested themselves in the endeavor. I feel privileged, moreover, to step into the fray as a practitioner now rather than as only a spectator. Now, as both a writer as well as an enthusiastic reader of personal essays, I have come to learn that the genre encourages those who are as passionate as a poet about right words, as confused as a child about right actions, and as anxious as a philosopher about right thinking to speculate out loud on paper. And, if the author is bold enough or arrogant enough, he or she might seek to publish those thoughts for a reading audience.

Ardent appreciation for the essay, it seems to me, is like getting religion. It is surrendering our intellect to an amateurish enthusiasm instead of to the rational evidence of hard science. In the end, passion for the essay is an infatuation with the intuitive and the spirited rather than a passionless surrender to empirical evidence. It is not like the old gospel song proclaiming that "Whosoever will may come." Instead, it reenforces my fundamental belief in predestination--the Elect will embrace it, and the rest will not--which is validated by a common sentiment that I have heard from

new converts to the genre: "I have been looking for this my whole life." It is a calling. And as with certain sects, those who are members can oftentimes pick each other out in a crowd. When the spirit moves, it not only overwhelms, it brands also.

So, you either believe or you don't believe, but you have no real choice in the matter. I didn't seem to have a choice, at least. And if you have no real choice in the matter, parochial arrogance goes out the window. Consequently, I never feel at liberty to criticize those who have no affection for the genre.

I imagine that when it comes to our passions--be they golf or gardening--we are predisposed toward certain ones. The essay embraced me rather than me it. It fits me the way Cinderella's foot slid into the glass slipper or the way my high school ball glove still hugs my hand. In the same manner that religion has satisfied other abstract needs in my life, as a form of expression for me as a reader and writer, the essay has met every need I have brought to it.

And for those without Calvinistic tendencies, the essay either feels right, or it does not feel right. A great part of the right feeling, if you are the reader, is the relationship developed with the constructed personality of the narrator. Or, if you are the author, the engagement is with the perceived mind of the

audience, the common ground between the author and the reader being a shared humanity, with all of the triumph, uncertainty, and frailty that go along with the human package.

* * *

"Faithful are the wounds of a friend," says the writer of Proverbs. In a personal essay, as a reader I am invited to engage the topic along with the author, perhaps to share in the attempt to understand more completely an amusing or a distressing observation about the author, myself, my culture, or the world at large.

Yet the author of the essay, although primarily dedicated to recording personal particularities, does not shy away from discordant friction. In his essay "Self-Reliance," Emerson posits, "To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men,--that is genius." The trick for the successful personal essayist is to balance elements of the particular with a more comprehensive human theme, and to wrap any bitter pills inside a palatable package--the most practical package being an engaging voice.

Although Scott Russell Sanders's approach to proclamations appears far less direct than Emerson's, he thinks, nevertheless, that he also knows a thing or two worth heralding. In his essay "Settling Down," from the

collection *Staying Put*, Sanders observes:

There are no privileged locations. If you stay put, your place becomes a holy center, not because it gives you access to the divine, but because in your stillness you hear what might be heard anywhere. All there is to see can be seen from anywhere in the universe; if you know how to look; and the influence of the entire universe converges on every spot. (115-16)

Does this proclamation look familiar? It should.

Sanders builds on the foundation Emerson laid a century earlier in "Self-Reliance," where Emerson declares that "Travelling is a fool's paradise. Our journeys discover to us the indifference of places." But what is it in these voices that sounds inoffensively inviting rather than patronizing or invasive? In Sanders's case, it may be the friendly familiarity he secures with the reader before suggesting behavioral changes. He is like the helpful neighbor who welcomes us to the new community with a delicious casserole before letting on that the settled folks in the neighborhood seriously frown on what we did last weekend--for instance, mowing our lawn before 9:00 a.m.

Indeed, Sanders's studied assertion that his readers should grow roots where they are speaks to my own desire to settle down, to end my nomadic wanderings so that I might invest the rest of my life in one community. And rather than resent Sanders's interference in my business, I appreciate his insight because, by now, I have invited

him into my life. He has earned the right to counsel me, for prior to his intrusion into my business, he has, as I said, acquainted me with his credentials as a neighbor.

In his essay "Jailhouse Blues" from *Secrets of The Universe*, Sanders confides,

This is merely one of my perversities, to brood on lack in the midst of plenty, to think of aging flesh while I bounce a baby in my arms, to imagine loneliness while I am laced in talk with friends, and to remember jails all during a week of freedom. It is a noxious trait, which causes my wife and children to grit their teeth. Knowing this, most of the time I keep my gloom under a bushel. But there it flickers, all the same, a candle of darkness.
(132)

The narrator of this bit of confession has invited me into his own life. Yet, before suggesting to me what he thinks I should be doing, he concedes to me his own flawed humanity. He reveals that he also has mowed too early on a weekend. And, after this introduction, his wounds are always those of a friend.

Sanders confirms my assessment in his essay "The Singular First Person." Here he says, "I choose to write about my experience not because it is mine but because it seems to me a door through which others might pass." Sanders is not clear, however, where that door leads. At times it may be merely a door into his personal world. More often it is to a quarter where both the author and the reader explore a relevant human issue, a door through which Sanders and the reader pass side by side.

Nevertheless, as with any relationship, be it with an author or an acquaintance, we may choose to like each other or not. If I grow weary of the author's company, I may leave the conversation at any time, as if I were merely a bystander to a discussion not meant for my ears. No offense intended, and none taken. On the other hand, if I enjoy the author's sentiments, if I find the voice appealing, the conversation to my liking, the message relevant and challenging, we may develop a friendship that lasts a lifetime.

Among the chorus of other engaging voices writing personal essays, the common ground for personal and cultural exploration is vast. While in the process of developing intimacy with her readers, Nancy Mairs invites those who feel so led to leer through her windows as she psychically undresses. She writes of her private experiences with puberty, rape, adultery, and insanity-- subjects we rarely speak about with close friends, much less with strangers. I suppose that her essays have an appeal for those with similarly tragic experiences or with sympathetic hearts. Yet Mairs admits that much of her writing is pure and unadulterated catharsis. "I have to write," she says. "If I avoid that mandate, I wind up trying to kill myself. It's as simple as that" (*Plaintext* 104).

In a voice similar to Mairs's captivating if

exhibitionistic one, Edward Hoagland in "The Threshold and the Jolt of Pain" confesses/boasts that he felt that he had to beat a woman with a hairbrush or a belt before having sex with her. He also admits that he spanked a woman the night before she gave birth. Why does he feel that he can tell us these things? Has he crossed the line dividing the personal from the confessional? And why is his narrative voice so attractive? Perhaps his experiences and feelings are more common or interesting to us than we care to admit.

Other essayists, like John McPhee and Joan Didion, with a skilled eye, feel more comfortable standing back a bit from their subjects to offer us observations on people we could not otherwise know. Their achievement is the skillful presentation of the characters and their motivations expressed through the vehicle of artfully crafted personal stories.

Norman Maclean's unfinished and underappreciated *Young Men and Fire* rings personally essayistic as well. His exquisitely crafted sentences and paragraphs detail his assessment of the fifteen Montana smokejumpers who died in the 1949 Mann Gulch fire. Of the incident, Maclean writes:

If a storyteller thinks enough of storytelling to regard it as a calling, unlike a historian he cannot turn from the suffering of his characters. A storyteller, unlike a historian, must follow compassion wherever it leads him.

He must be able to follow his characters, even into the smoke and fire, and bear witness to what they thought and felt even when they themselves no longer knew. This story of the Mann Gulch fire will not end until it feels able to walk the final distance to the crosses with those who for the time being are blotted out by smoke. They were young and did not leave much behind them and need someone to remember them. (101-2)

Maclean recounts the last moments of these men, their stations of the cross he calls them, as he reconstructs the inexplicable circumstances of a private horror into a meaningful public drama through the muscular and artful potency of the essay. His attempt to record and to understand the event in Montana examines a most basic human question: does the discovery of universal patterns transform what seems otherwise enigmatically catastrophic into something at least meaningfully tragic?

In relation to Mairs and Hoagland, who take atypical risks with their personal revelations, Scott Russell Sanders and Joseph Epstein represent a small part of the middle ground of the personal essay. They write about where they came from, who they are, and what they think about things both specifically and generally. Sanders ranges the gamut from depressing personal disclosure in the account of his family's experience with his father's alcoholism ("Under the Influence") to writing theory ("The Singular First Person") to character sketches ("Living Souls") to straight-in-your-face eco-activism

("After the Flood").

While Sanders cannot resist the well-crafted moral application, Epstein vigorously advances to the humorous punch line. Epstein is by no means a literary lightweight, but he does approach reality from a more self-effacing and jovial angle, both traditional qualities of the genre. However, Epstein also has a serious political and social side, which we see, for example, in "'And That's What I Like About the South.'"

These writers are only a few who serve to illustrate the breadth of opportunity available in the personal essay. The personal essay as a subgenre of the essay willingly tolerates a cacophony of discordant voices, not only from authors with dissimilar backgrounds and points of view but even from individual authors seeking to harmonize the chorus of voices within themselves.

* * *

As it is with many men approaching their fortieth birthday, thoughts of mortality compel me to reflect on my life, how I have lived and, more subtly for me, how I have constructed a private and public persona both in my life and in my writing. Living a life, I have come to think, is in many ways similar to composing one. As Emerson said, "There is properly no history; only biography." Although I don't often agree with Emerson, despite my opinion of his opinions, he is, in this one

opinion, correct. Where there is a great earthquake, if someone is not present to record it, to suffer the natural insults of its power, or to witness the physical results of its difference, had the event not occurred, we would be no wiser.

There remains, nevertheless, an insurmountable problem with biography; having read one, we are reasonably sure of its subject; having read two on a given person, we know fewer uncontested facts than having read one; having read three, the gaps in our certainty increase exponentially, driving us to distraction if not straight into autism. I include in biography what we recklessly think of as autobiography (a principal convention of the personal essay) because, though the author has the advantage of knowing the subject personally, he may not know him well, or, for heinous or self-serving reasons, may choose to leave out the best parts of his own story. Who we are, I have come to think, has less to do with reality than with our creation of a fictitious character for our viewing and reading public. In addition, we often misrepresent our wares, even to ourselves, because it makes us more interesting that way and because, as Norman Maclean says, reality often has too little artistic merit.

Nevertheless, I find myself wary of my own autobiographical material for other reasons. I fear that

the accumulated pile of pages before me may not amount to more than a few interesting episodes, which when lined up end to end could barely fill a month of my life. And as I reflect on my life and tell my stories, especially to those who were not with me when the events happened, I permit myself, quite reasonably, to edit the episodes in my favor. I have constructed and continue to construct my own persona in life as I do in art.

To some degree the organization of this collection more closely resembles the abutted images of a patchwork quilt rather than clearly distinct texts. Yet only the opening essay, "Stone Child," and the closing one, "Half-Interest in a Harley," are dependent--the latter being dependent on the former. "Half-Interest in a Harley" brings some closure to "Stone Child." Therefore, I deliberately choose not to poke around in old wounds. Rather than re-introduce past offenses, I only allude to them. I intended that the other essays be able to stand on their own, and hence the repetition of many introductions such as "Cheryl, my wife," when, otherwise, one introduction would serve for the rest.

I recognize among the gallery of my own narrative personalities Mairs's and Hoagland's penchant for exhibitionism, Maclean's passion for the right word in its right place, Sanders's anxiety for his neighbors' well-being, and Epstein's self-effacing joviality.

Although I admit that all of the voices are constructed to some degree, they are all entirely authentic.

As I look back on early drafts of individual essays, I detect a dissonant array of competing voices. I understand now what Doug Atkins is saying of his own narrative voice in his essay "Finding a Voice" from *Estranging the Familiar*: "It's a voice impure, contaminated, made up of many others" (179). The trick, it seems, comes in the attempt to integrate those personalities, in discovering some consonance or harmony in the squealing and squawking of the various vocal registers. Be that as it may, the problem in many cases, I have come to believe, is not with constructing a consistent voice within a collection of essays but with continually conjuring up the single authentic voice in one text and then encouraging that persona to write something worth reading.

"Stone Child," the foundation for the rest of the collection, is one that I especially did not want to write. I cannot even think about the person who wrote it without feeling haunted by his voice. But as Sanders does with his essay "Under the Influence," the opening essay in his *Secrets of the Universe* collection, I think it appropriate first to establish my human credentials, therein setting up for my audience the defining context of my early life, for experiences at that time clearly

color my point of view for years to follow. And yet, after writing "Stone Child," I can now appreciate why Nancy Mairs feels compelled to write about her horrifying life experiences. Setting down such feelings of personal indignities and violations in print and then closing the covers on the whole affair can be tremendously liberating and cathartic.

Nevertheless, my voice is not the only one in that essay. I introduce outside voices that help me get through my account of those days. One is that of a professor who comments on the strangeness of the narrative voice in the essay, the product of a personality wholly unfamiliar and alien to him. Another is that of my sister, who confirms my absence from some of the situations that seem to me to this day to have happened to someone else and not to me. I recall witnessing those events as a bystander, I say in the essay, rather than participating in them. The last outside voice is that of my wife. Because of her, the haunted boy in "Stone Child" is at rest. Because of her, the last half of my life has paid for the first half with interest. She knows who I am. She knows every secret, yet still loves me. I can admit to being a bumbler, and I am entirely free to be a boy along with my own sons.

The voices begin to integrate as I move through the childhood essays to the adult themes. The essay "Eagle

Tree" is the first transition piece. I write about a place very special to me as a child, and then let the action of the essay conclude with an episode where I re-experience a boyhood misadventure alongside one of my sons.

A friend observed the other day how time often seems to fold on itself rather than to circle back as if it were a snake eating its own tail. Her observation conveys perfectly the discomfort I express in "Eagle Tree" at suddenly being thrust into a situation that, had I foreseen the events re-folding, I would have avoided the latter encounter altogether, preferring not to relive boyhood nightmares.

"Of Roses, Rosaries, and a Year at Catholic School" is another essay that culminates with my sons stalking the grounds of my misadventures. Walking down the streets and halls of my youth must seem to them like both a history lesson and a museum tour as we handle the various artifacts of the stories they have heard from me and about me. If nothing else, these field trips into the past will serve to illustrate the pages of their imaginations and memories.

"The Bones of Childhood" signals the actual break from boyhood to manhood, although, as the later essays demonstrate, I have yet to put away my childish things. Still, I step away from the snowy well of the pine tree

to go about the business of being a husband, father, worker, sportsman, and dabbler as I attempt to live out my life as happily and productively as I can manage.

The dominant voice in the later essays, the one that does not take itself too seriously, the one that invites others to clamber through the unlocked window rather than leer through the open blinds, is the most authentic and the most integrated voice, the one that truly reflects who I am today. In particular, the essay with the title "Dead Cats, Appliances as Metaphors for Lasting Relationships, Other Piffle, and Meteors" represents both the humorous adult voice as well as the episodic arrangement of the events, an arrangement reflecting the pervasive structure of almost every essay in this collection. This essay is also the first consequence of a challenge from Scott Russell Sanders, a challenge that I write about relationships. So, if you like these essays, thank you. If you do not like them, blame him.

Being in a long and happy relationship himself, the subject of many of his own essays, Sanders expressed a concern in a workshop I had with him that other writers wade in on the side of commitment to a life-partner. I accepted the challenge enthusiastically, not realizing at the time that Sanders's personal commitment to place provides him with a distinct advantage when writing about fidelity to persons.

I, on the other hand, have never lived in one place for longer than five years. I offer in way of illustration that Cheryl and I are in our twelfth house in nineteen years of marriage, most of the houses being in different parts of the country--seven different states--and not just across town. Therefore, my private concept of place is much less developed than it would be with Sanders and other essayists where places and persons are so artfully blended. When I think of home, people come to mind rather than geography. And, because I have never invested myself in one place, I rarely consider regional or community issues. As a consequence of my limitation, I can tie no particular character to a particular land. Even as I say that, I think about the Old Troll in the essay "Eagle Tree." But he could be any old codger anywhere. We all remember one.

Beginning with "Why I Won't Fight Women," the narrator of the essays takes on an even more approachable persona, or so I like to think. The voice of that narrator may overstate my capacity for bumbling, but the facts of the matter remain impeccably accurate. I really did get beat up by a girl in the sixth grade, and a woman in my writing group did challenge me to a boxing match.

"Peeing Is Like Paychecks," I fear, fails to translate across gender lines. Men seem to "get it" immediately, while women--although they readily recognize

the behaviors and attitudes expressed by the men in their lives--still cannot appreciate our misgivings and misunderstandings regarding human body functions, especially women's body functions. I think the old saying, "Boys never grow up, they just get bigger," is accurate in most cases.

The confessional, self-effacing voice in "Why I Won't Fight Women" and "Peeing Is Like Paychecks" is wholly congruent with my unsophisticated notions of gender politics. I harbor no delusional ambitions of ever bridging the great gulf fixed between men and women. I only aim to record in these essays a few candid gestures I have witnessed from my post on the rim of the vast gender schism. I conclude that it is indeed a wonder men and women ever get together.

"Barefoot in My Boots" and "She Reads My Mind" began their lives as one essay. I separated them into two essays when several readers independently suggested the same natural break. These two essays best represent my fascination with functional, happy relationships. Along with the essay "Dead Cats, Appliances as Metaphors for Lasting Relationships, Other Piffle, and Meteors," they have been especially appealing to the women who have read them. As a consequence, I have been accused by some men of proliferating fluffy romance, when, in fact, the voice is authentic, and the events as well as the sentiments

are genuine.

The title "Suffer Little Children" I lifted directly from the Book of Mark. More than a little self-conscious about my emphasis on humor, I took a turn toward the serious in this essay as well as in the essay "Murdering Abel," written immediately before "Suffer Little Children." "Murdering Abel" began as an essay titled "Things that Go Boom in the Night," as I explored my fascination with guns and explosives. After the essay turned the corner from light-hearted humor to serious social commentary, the draft title, according to my critics, became too misleading to keep. All of the later and more serious essays, moreover, are a result of my questioning my sphere of influence--questioning how much productive impact I have on my surroundings.

While in the midst of questioning my influence on the world, I began an essay titled "When Lear Is Mad," from one of Kent's speeches in *King Lear*. The characters Kent and Cassandra have always fascinated me, Kent for his selfless loyalty and Cassandra for her tragic affliction. In that aborted essay I wrote,

Cassandra had the worst of fates--the gift of perfect prophecy and the curse of never being believed. Her curse drove her to madness. I will choose silence instead. Or perhaps, behind the scenes, play banished Kent to the world's mad Lear.

Like Kent, I am doggedly loyal. The down side of being

loyal is the immoderate degree of care I have for friends, teams, colleagues, and organizations. But care sometimes includes taking those friends aside and letting them know when they are behaving inappropriately. "Iron sharpens iron," says the writer of Proverbs, and "Faithful are the wounds of a friend," as I already mentioned.

The inherent personal horror of caring compounds exponentially when our prophecies go unheeded. A boss of mine once warned me that he did not hire me to be right; he hired me to be persuasive. My being right is entirely useless to him, he said, if I am not also convincing.

Yet, how often I feel like Cassandra when I test my ability to convince people. The area of my sphere of influence can be easily circumscribed, I have come to learn, especially since I so often ignore my own advice. Nevertheless, in the more serious essays, my natural penchant for didactics gets free reign.

"Imagining Kate Oardin" may be the least essayistic of any in this collection. It is certainly the least veracious. Although I fabricated many of the imagined details of Kate's life, for nearly two years I actually thought of Kate as a personality. The sign I refer to in the essay has since been removed. Fortunately, I took a photograph of it shortly after I finished the essay.

In "Boat Wench" I explore my competing kiss-or-kill natures. In the attempt to integrate my dual personali-

ties, I discovered that integration comes from a conscious acceptance of one's various selves. If I were to examine the reasons why my friends and family like me, I suspect I would discover that it is because of my commitment to home and family along with my moth-like attraction for the flame. I am entirely reliable and yet wholly unpredictable at the same time.

Thematically, the last two essays validate my feelings about relationships and, in some respects, resolve some of the earlier tensions. What I encountered at my high school reunion surprised me to say the least ("The Reunion"). For one thing, the basic characters of the individual actors have not changed much over the years. The gloomsayers are still cynical; the optimists are still cheery; the gracious are still kind.

But the reunion was frightening as well as validating. I avoided a number of serious mistakes, it seems, either by the grace of God or by extraordinary good fortune. Regardless of the source of my blessings, it is humbling to see how well events transpired without my planning them. Had I turned to the left rather than to the right, who knows what might have happened.

The reunion also served as the catalyst for a number of old stories. With a twenty-year cushion between me and the events of those days, the gathering allowed me the opportunity to debunk a few old myths as well as to

expand on stories to classmates, teachers, chaperones, and administrators who are now ready to look upon my activities with humor rather than with chagrin.

I have a concern, though, because one of my friends and critics finds the voice in this essay incongruent with the other voices. I explained to him that the reunion was so startling and novel to me that it brought out entirely new emotions. He should not be too surprised that the voice is unfamiliar to him; it is unfamiliar to me as well.

Time is not only a great equalizer, as I came to find out at the reunion, it also serves to provide us with a clearer understanding of our own past. Call it maturity. Call it healing. Whatever you choose to call it, it leads me to the last essay.

While writing "Half-Interest in a Harley" I discovered that, rather than using up our lives dwelling on old offenses and settling old scores, being genuinely happy is the best way to get even. Revenge isn't a dish best served cold; if it must be served at all, it's best served with fully outstretched hand and a pleasant smile. In addition, I learned that going through the planning process with someone may be more important than actually carrying out the plan itself. The shared idea of doing something together can be as meaningful in a relationship as the shared fact.

* * *

This introduction is about finding a voice. "It's all a matter of distance," Atkins says. "Finding the right distance is another name for finding a voice" (170). His comment brings to mind an anecdote that Cheryl recently told me. A premature baby boy in her intensive care unit had spent the first three months of his life with a feeding tube down his throat. Several days after the doctors removed the tube, a gurgling noise came from the boy's crib. The doctors and nurses immediately focused their attention on the boy because they had never heard a sound uttered from his crib before. They could not help but laugh when they saw the startled expression on the boy's face. Judging from his surprised look and his searching eyes, it was readily apparent that the boy could not imagine where the voice was coming from. For until that moment, he had had no voice of his own. The boy continued for several more days to jump and start whenever he made a sound, not recognizing his own voice, not being able to fix the right distance between himself and the still raspy but strengthening sounds coming from somewhere inside him.

It is my hope that, as that boy discovered the source of the voice coming from within himself, by the end of this collection my own voice has become more consonant, more familiar, and less startling.

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Stone Child

"I ain't agoing to tell all that happened--it would make me sick again if I was to do that."
(Huck Finn)

"I saw that nigger kiss you on the lips," my father screamed at my mother, knocking her to the floor with what sounded like a popping backhand across her face.

"He kissed me on the cheek," she cried. "Just the way everyone else did as they left. He was just being polite."

I was in the back bedroom, on the top bunk, listening to the argument intensify one-sidedly. I cried as I heard my mother innocently plead her lost case. She had worked so hard to make this Christmas party at our house a pleasant evening. My sister Debbie and her husband, Norm, who were visiting for the holidays begged from the bottom bunk for me to stay and not to interfere. "You'll only make it worse," they said. The beating in the dining room went on endlessly.

Mom had stepped in every time he beat me, usually making it worse, but at least she tried to lessen my

suffering. Her courage was both universally moral and physical, not tolerating cruelty on any front, always intervening to lessen the suffering of a meanness or an injustice. However, when her time came, I didn't help her. No one did. I have never before or since felt like such a coward. All I did was lie in bed, cry and, for around the six hundredth time in my life, imagine Dad dead.

I have imagined him dead so often and so vividly, it's as if in my lifetime I have seen a thousand corpses and attended their thousand funerals. Now, when I attend a funeral, I go to comfort the living because my imagination has made me far too familiar with the dead. For the dead I feel stabbing twinges of nothing. The only thing I feel is wonder that I don't feel.

I can explain Dad only by describing what he is like. I know that cats can develop a condition along their spine that makes them hyper-sensitive to touch. If you rub an afflicted cat along one of these sensitive spots, it may scratch or bite you out of pure, undeliberate, nervous reaction. Dad is like an afflicted cat plagued with emotional hot spots. Factor in alcohol, and the equation becomes lethal. On a normal day when he is just drinking beer (about two six packs), he gets verbally abusive and occasionally physically so. But when he feeds his demons hard liquor, they possess him

completely.

I have seen him in a drunken rage lift a small boy by the throat with one hand and repeatedly bang the back of the boy's head against a wall. But what is odd is that I have never been able to see that incident from the boy's perspective. I have somehow emotionally and physically distanced myself to the degree that it appears I am not that boy at all. Yet even from my vantage point on the side, an ever-tightening funnel of grayness closes in around me until those with me in the room slowly fade from sight. Then, as the boy catches his breath and the blood works its way back to his brain, I see him in a crumpled heap on the floor as others in the room come back into view. Many of my memories are like that, as if they are of experiences that happened to someone else-- memories related by a stone child, a dispassionate specter floating across the bleared canvas of a sad boy's life.

This is the first time that I have ever mentioned that many of my memories come to me secondhand. I see them through the eyes of a shadowy figure who passively and painlessly watched my childhood from an angle and a distance. After I read these last lines to my sister the other day, the phone grew very quiet.

"Are you there?" I asked.

I heard her begin to cry. "I've never said this to

anyone," she told me. "You were the one who always got it the worst or at least the most. But while these things were happening, it was as if you weren't there."

I asked her to explain.

"When Dad would hit you," she said, "it's as if it wasn't you at all. It's like he was hitting someone else or nobody. Like you had gone somewhere. I remember looking in your face and saying to myself, 'He isn't even in there.'"

* * *

After reading an early draft of this text, an acquaintance who has read other essays of mine commented on the range of my writing. "Nothing you write sounds like anything else I've read of yours. You have a great range of voices," he told me.

I understood him to mean that my presence sounded different to him in each piece. I didn't react to his comment directly, but his observation struck me strangely. It had not occurred to me that the shadowy figure from my past who watched much of my childhood for me might be taking an active interest in me again. What is this shadow to me? A translator maybe? Or a scribe? It might be that he has come back to interpret the ledger of those days, to square the books, and give me an accurate record of my past. Since I won't let him talk to me in my dreams, he speaks to me through the different

voices in my writing. I'm not sure that I'm ready to listen yet.

As I think back over the disparate episodes of my boyhood, I discover subtle signals that we all missed regarding the dependent relationship of violence to alcohol in our family. I have known the smell of alcohol without the feel of violence, but I have never had a beating when I couldn't at least smell beer. One winter day--I was in the 7th grade--my brother and I quarreled as brothers often do. He is younger than I, and, for whatever reason, I had pushed him down onto a snow bank and would not let him up. When Dad saw what was happening outside, he yelled out the door for me to come in.

"You like hitting people smaller than you?" he asked.

My protest that I had not hit my brother at all went unheard.

"I'll show you what it feels like," he said. "Go down in the basement and put on the boxing gloves," he ordered. "I'll be down in a minute."

Knowing the anticipation would be torture to me, Dad waited for nearly fifteen minutes before he came down the stairs. Slowly, he pulled on one glove, then the other.

"You had better be swinging," he threatened as he glared at me over his gloves, "because I'm going to be."

My father is a powerfully built, stocky man. Five feet six, about 165 pounds. I was bragging to him one day that I could lift over my head the 100 pounds of weight on the barbell set we had in the basement. When I told him that, he silently walked over to the bar with all 100 pounds on it and placed one hand in the middle of the bar. With one arm, he snapped the weights up over his head, balanced it a moment, and pumped it up and down several times as if the steel weights were made of thin air.

I put up my guard in front of my face the way he had taught me. I could see him between my gloves swaying in front of me as we both started to bob, weave, and circle in the center of our dusty concrete ring. He began by punching my own gloves back into my face, only occasionally reaching around my gloves to hit me on the side of the head. It wasn't long before my ears started to ring and I felt my brain begin to knock against my skull from the concussion of the punches. My nose was on fire from the impact of my own gloves, and my eyes watered from the pain and fear.

"Start swinging," he yelled.

I stuck out a couple of feeble left jabs. He effortlessly avoided my punches, demonstrating to me his superior agility and skill. I threw another left jab. This time his gloves dropped as he deftly leaned back to

avoid it. Another left jab. Same thing. Then I faked a left jab, and just as he lowered his hands and leaned back on his heels, I lunged forward, coming over the top of his gloves with all my weight behind my right fist. Boom. He staggered and dropped.

For a half-second I exulted--until the full potential of the consequences of my act assaulted my senses. I would be killed. I looked down at Dad as he rolled over into a sitting position on the basement floor. He looked up at me. I could tell by his quiz-zical expression that he was deliberating my fate. I shifted my gaze from his eyes to my boxing gloves in a vain, silent plea, as if to say that my hands had acted on their own apart from my conscious will. He leaned forward, placing the palms of his gloves on the cold concrete floor.

"Let's go upstairs and talk about this over a beer," he said as he slowly worked his way to his feet.

I followed him up the stairs and took a seat at the kitchen table as he pulled two cans of beer from the refrigerator.

* * *

With tacit approval, I started drinking heavily the winter of that 7th grade and didn't stop drinking until nearly five years later. But until then, I drank myself oblivious nearly every Friday and Saturday night. During

that time, I ran away often, but I never ran far or stayed long. My sister and mother told me a few years ago that they were afraid that one day I would drown myself in the river near our house. I have never told them that occasionally I had looked deep into the dark water.

When I was in high school, Dad slapped me across the face for neglecting to put a new roll of toilet paper on the empty holder. I took off for the woods, but not before I showed the neighborhood kids my bulging blue lip and swelling eye. I had competing reasons for showing off my injuries. The first was that I had just read The Outsiders, and like the good-hearted but delinquent boys in the book, I let the neighborhood kids see that I could wear the tattoos of physical injustice like a soldier's badge of honor. But the more compelling reason was to show the world what a bastard Dad could be for the pettiest offenses. I needed to scream about the incoherent abuse in my life. For the first reason, I felt heroic; for the second, I could not have felt more treacherous.

Part of our family code, a code drilled into our souls as children, is the treason of speaking publicly for any cause against any other member of the family. The intensity of the conflicting emotions generated by strict adherence to this family code required from me

love for Dad when, at the same time, I also hated him. It demanded my unconditional loyalty when I needed to end the physical and emotional abuse. And, ultimately, there was my very rational and natural desire for approval from my father and yet the cathartic, self-healing need to tell him to go to hell. But instead of moderation in all things, with us, there is moderation in nothing. The pendulum never just swings in the middle. It always slams against one side of the case or the other.

I was emotional, however. It is time to step back. Over the years, with moderate success, I have disengaged myself from Dad by wondering at the tangled psychology of this absurd thing. I imagine to myself that it's like watching a criminal in a police interrogation room through a one-way window. I see how the accused man behaves when left alone and how he responds to others, but he doesn't see me. I watch from an angle and a distance, dispassionately learning about him. The man shifts his gaze to the one-way mirror across the room but does not see his own reflection looking back. I note from his indifference that he is incapable of discerning his own outward appearance, much less sense the hollowness in his soul. He is a vampire. He is a rapist and a vampire. He has raped a boy of his childhood but, more tragically, raped him of his dignity. He has drained the life-blood of an innocent, engendering a vampiric progeny

who must unwillingly share a deathless torment.

Not many years ago, Cheryl came into the kitchen from outside while I was on the phone.

"You're talking to your father," she whispered in my ear as she walked by. I was stricken with her insight because as far as I knew she should have had no idea who I was talking to. "You always pace when you're on the phone with your father," she told me after I hung up. "I can tell when your mom gets your dad on the phone because you stand up as soon as you start talking to him and pace around the kitchen. You don't sit down again until your mom gets back on the phone. You didn't know you do that?"

I didn't know I do that.

* * *

All this said, but to what end? I have come to believe that parents are like potters. Our children are born warm and soft and malleable, but as they age, they harden into the shape that we have formed them. In spite of our ignorance and mistakes, some children may be nearly perfectly formed. And contrary to our best intentions, many will be warped and misshapen, at least to some small degree. A few will be cracked and brittle from too much time in a too hot fire.

I don't offer my past as an excuse for my present. As Dad's sins are his, my sins are my own. I offer this

only as a testimony that I did not shape myself. I know that I am cracked and fragile to the point where I am nearly exhausted from trying to hold myself together.

"Is that last line true?" Cheryl asked when she read it.

"Yeah, it is," I said.

"You need help."

"I have help," I told her.

"Just imagine yourself hanging onto a rope in the dark," she tried to reassure me. "When you let go, you'll find you were only six inches from the ground."

"What if you're wrong?"

"What if I'm right?"

"I can't take that chance."

* * *

"Thine and of all thy Sons,/ The weal or woe in thee
is plac't; beware." (Paradise Lost)

But again Cheryl's voice, a welcome voice,
trespasses into my story.

"I don't like the way this ends," she scolds me.
"Make it say, 'But when I did let go, I found that she
was right, and. . . .'"

"And?"

She smiles as she hands me my paper. "And they
lived happily ever after."

Eagle Tree

Many of the daydreams I had as a child I dreamt at the top of Eagle Tree, the tallest tree on the highest hill in our small Maine town. From my swaying mast-head in the top branches, like Ishmael who had ventured out to sea with mad Captain Ahab, I looked out over the world. In trees and mast-heads God blends equal parts wind, sun, fear, height, loneliness, and reflection to shape a young philosopher.

To the north of Eagle Tree, as far as you could see, raged a wind-swept ocean of frothy white birches, swirling whitecaps amid a tumbling green sea of pines and maples. Due east, about 300 yards beyond a narrow channel of woodland waves, up on the beach across a yellow hay field, the Old Farmer lived in a white-shuttered, gray-shingled, impeccably arranged world of his own creation. He lived in the house with his equally reclusive bachelor son, the Young Farmer.

From my perch I could look down on the rolling yellow field to the neat brown path that led from the Old

Farmer's house out to his flawless vegetable garden. Sometimes I would watch as he slowly walked across that field, either coming to or going from his private art. It seems hardly possible that such a peaceful setting could harbor the meanest man in our small town.

It was my misfortune that the Old Farmer's property line ran adjacent to the woods behind my parents' house. My misfortune because I had to cross his land to get to the best hiking and hunting trails. At 14 I was just old enough to hunt alone and just big enough to have a small motorcycle that I rode on the forest trails and logging roads. But on the narrow path through the Old Farmer's woods, nearly a half-mile behind his house (just beyond his precious garden), planted in the middle of the trail, stood a forbidding, rust-pocked "No Trespassing" sign.

Had the trail not been posted, I would never have hesitated to cross his property, regardless of my knowledge that he did not want me there. But the sign, to the Old Farmer, was a license to impose his will upon me. He never sent the police to my house. Instead, he would try to catch me.

It was never a problem slinking quietly by on foot; however, there was nothing subtle about my loud, sputtering dirt bike. But it was either run the gauntlet on his path or risk another visit to traffic court if I got caught on the road again. And, according to the judge, I

could not risk another run-in with the law.

Whenever I made a dash for it on my bike across the Old Farmer's property, usually a couple times a week, I felt as giddy as the littlest Billy Goat Gruff must have felt trying to cross the bridge without being eaten by the Troll.

One day I hit a garden hose that my Old Troll had tied chest-high between two trees across his trail. He took our mid-autumn raids on his garden too seriously I thought as I gathered myself from the ground.

My friends and I raided gardens pretty much all summer. We considered summer campouts incomplete without fresh vegetables. The Old Farmer had the best sweet corn and tomatoes, the firemen the best cucumbers, and everybody had pretty decent snap beans. Corn is best wrapped in tin foil and grilled on a camp fire, but in a pinch we just threw it on the coals still in the husk--raccoon corn we called it. Because of the haphazard cooking method, raccoon corn is usually undercooked or overcooked, oftentimes both cases on the same ear. One particularly windy morning we ate a breakfast of leftover raccoon corn and raw perch because we couldn't get a cooking fire going.

We considered pilfered cucumbers a delicacy, especially if someone brought along a salt shaker. We cut the ends from cucumbers with our knives, then rubbed

the green caps around the slice until the cucumber lathered milky white. We were told doing this sapped away bitterness.

After the first killing frost, we robbed rotten tomatoes by the bushel basket from the Old Farmer's garden to use as the ammunition for our fall tomato wars, rotten tomatoes being much softer than crab apples. Tomatoes also leave an undeniable red splatter when an enemy gets hit with one.

Not many weeks after I ran into the garden hose, on an otherwise pleasant summer evening, the Old Farmer shot at me. About two hours before the shooting, I had crossed the western edge of his field on my bike. He guessed correctly that I would come back through on my way home.

Like a duck hunter rising from a blind, he popped up from behind some hay he had piled beside a small pine tree and leveled a pistol at my chest. A tall, thin man, he always wore neatly pressed brown work clothes and a matching brown pith helmet. With mechanically deliberate movements, he sprang from behind the hay pile. Not realizing my danger at the time, I merely thought it odd that his pith helmet took up so much room on the horizon as it silhouetted black against the early evening sky.

Pop! Pop! Pop!

Short yellow flames leaped from the pistol barrel at

me as I approached him going too fast to stop. After he fired the shots, he lowered the pistol and charged toward me in an attempt to knock me from the motorcycle.

Spinning the bike around, I smashed through a grove of small pine trees in my hasty retreat to a farther, safer place, where I turned off my headlight and took the dark road home. When I told my parents the Old Farmer had shot at me, they didn't believe it.

"Stay off his property," was all my mother said.

* * *

On a slow summer day a few years earlier, when we were 12 or so, Ricky, my oft-times accomplice in delinquency, and I decided to climb Eagle Tree. A few years later I wrote a pitiful poem about it that my mother had framed and still keeps on her living room wall.

Eagle Tree

We will climb Eagle Tree today
No, conquer it today,
Put a flag at the top
A red flag
For everyone to see.

My friend Ricky was a fearless, reckless, athletic hoodlum. From bucket diving (exploring the bottom of the lake while breathing the air from pails stuck over our heads), to midnight 10-degrees-below-zero hockey games, to early starts on the hunting season, together we defined the physical arrogance native to young boys.

To us, Eagle Tree bore a mystique. It attracted

Ricky and me if not exactly like moths to a flame then like bugs to a windshield. We thought part of the mystique we sensed had something to do with an Indian legend, though we weren't sure what Indians or what legend. Whether or not the tree carried a blessing or a curse (we assumed a curse), we implicitly understood that something unpleasant would happen to us if we fooled with it. Somehow, we just knew the tree was special. We used the word "holy" a lot when we talked about it. We convinced ourselves, however, that the tree would bless us if we respected it and if we had the courage to climb it.

As far as we knew, no one had ever climbed Eagle Tree before, the trunk being too thick to wrap legs or arms around and the lowest branches being about 30 feet high. The only way we could see to climb it was to shimmy up an adjacent maple and cross over on one of the lower branches of the big pine.

We made it all the way to the trunk on the first attempt, but couldn't figure out how to get past a bare, nubby section about a third of the way up to the top. On the second attempt, I fell out of the maple when the branch I was standing on broke.

Tomorrow we will try again,
Today I fell.
You looked puzzled as I tumbled past you--
Nothing you could do.

Rick was below me when I fell, but fortunately he was on the other side of the maple. I can still see his expression. Although my body was rapidly accelerating to the limits of the speed of gravity, my eyes and brain watched my situation as if it were happening in slow motion to someone else, giving me entirely too much time to think about a present difficulty that I could do very little about.

Rick's mouth gaped open and his eyes bugged in an exaggerated expression of surprise as I snapped branches on my way by him. I watched his face follow me and saw his hand grab the empty air above my head like someone closing his fingers too late for that dollar-bill-catching game. I shifted my own gaze to the matter at hand--the rock wall, once thirty feet below, now twenty feet and gaining.

I thought it curious that I kept falling feet-first, snapping every branch with a dead-center direct hit on the bottom of my feet rather than a glancing blow that would have spun me out of control.

Listing my options in my head, only two came to mind--do nothing and land on the rock wall below the tree, or stop falling. I thought it amusing that, had I been dropping head first, my list of two choices would have been shorter by one. As it was, neither choice seemed very appealing--a true dilemma in the most

definitive sense.

How did I get into this situation? I had situated myself, of course. Climbing this tree was wholly unnecessary. I put myself at risk because it pleased me to. Had I considered the price of failure for an ambition so frivolous?

A professor once said after returning to me a less-than-successful paper that he was not as interested in the degree of my success as he was the quality of my failure. In his mind, I had failed brilliantly. Another professor confided after grading my less-than-dazzling comprehensive exam that he had seen worse performances pass. In this professor's mind, I had succeeded poorly. The failure made me feel better because I had attempted something no one else had done just to see if I could do it. And, in fact, I had *not* succeeded better than most others. But in the other case, I nearly failed in doing what was required of everyone.

Success is not measured by how far up you go, an older man once said to me, but by how high you bounce after you hit bottom. Great attempts invite disaster, he said.

What is the advantage of climbing a tree no one else has climbed? Am I more kind for it? A more considerate neighbor? More just? More charitable? Who stood to gain from my success? And if I failed?

"Why do you do these things?" my wife asks me, suggesting that life is fatal as it is.

"Because I can," I tell her, implying that she is less than me because she cannot.

After falling nearly fifteen feet, I wrapped my arms and legs around the trunk of the maple and slid like a fireman going down a pole. Eventually, the friction of my skidding flesh against the coarse tree bark stopped me a few feet above the rocks.

When I recovered enough to take an inventory of my remaining parts, I saw that blood was running down my left arm and pooling in my hand before dripping through my fingers. Rolled up skin framed the trailing edges of meaty burns on the inside of my left forearm and bicep. My once-white T-shirt was now pasted to my chest with a thickening crimson goo. Rick peeled my shirt over my head to reveal slashed ribs from the belt line under my left arm around to the middle of my chest. But I had cheated the bottom. Instead of hitting it and bouncing, I slid to it and walked away.

Bloody ribs and angry Mother
Forbid me to conquer today.

Because I hid my wounds under a long-sleeve shirt, it wasn't until late the next day that my mother discovered my mishap. She forbade me to climb--a good intention, but entirely ineffective. By the end of the

day, we had hung a big red bedspread from the top of Eagle Tree.

We find a route.
Like laboring ants with crumbs on our backs
We make many trips up Eagle Tree.
Nails, boards, pipe, a red bedspread
We watch the sunset from our towering perch.
People stop their cars on the road
To ask neighbors about us.
Mothers tremble.

It took the combined strength of two Maine winters to tear the bedspread off the pole. But as long as our flag was in the tree, every morning as I left for the school bus and every day during the summer, I would look up the hill behind our house and see it waving at me. Often, I would climb to my perch just to sit and think.

One evening, not long ago, my mother called. Her voice was solemn and low in a way I had never heard it before or since. "They cut down Eagle Tree today," she said, as if she were telling me a childhood friend had died. "They're building houses up on the hill."

Although it was left unspoken, we both knew that this was symbolic of something. The old progress cliché? My transition to manhood? Maybe the symbol is of the loss of common ground between a mother and her son. The loss of shared images. The weeks it took her to heal my wounds. The slow-motion memories of falling permanently etched in my skin. The triumph of surviving her rage when she saw the flag in Eagle Tree. To me the whole

experience had been like the Indian custom of counting coup on an enemy by tapping him with a tomahawk rather than killing him. My mother and I had shared the image of a young man counting coup on a doting mother. It was a pleasant image for both of us, and now the tangible evidence of that image was missing.

After a long pause, she broke the silence. "Are you okay?" she asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Anything else going on?"

"No, I just thought you would want to know." As it turned out, after cutting down the tree, the contractors decided not to build. Irony had counted coup on me.

* * *

Last summer during a cross-country move, we took a two-week side trip through Maine. The first afternoon in town, I took my older son, Bobby, and his friend Philip, who had come with us on the trip, up on the hill to see what was left of Eagle Tree. As the boys sat on the warm rock wall on exactly the spot where I would have landed when I fell, I sat on the stump of what had once been Eagle Tree and told them stories of my childhood. After a while, Bobby asked me if the Old Farmer was still living.

"He can't be," I told him.

The boys got up and followed me as I walked down the hill and into the woods on a long-forgotten trail leading

toward the Old Farmer's house. Eventually we stepped out of the woods and onto a well-maintained path that led us to an impeccable vegetable garden. For the boys, it was like stepping into the magical pages of a fairy tale. For me, then in my mid-thirties, it was the physical reincarnation of an old recurring nightmare.

As we approached the garden, in a hushed tone I warned the boys to be very quiet and to stay out of view of the gray house across the field. Even as I spoke, we heard a dog begin to bark. We ambled to the squared corner of one of the perfect corn rows and stretched our necks around to get a clearer view of the house. A tall, thin man in stiff brown work clothes stood on the porch, glaring across the field to see what his dog was barking at. When he spotted us, he disappeared back into the house only to re-emerge wearing a big brown pith helmet.

He worked his way stiffly but deliberately down the porch steps before unleashing the German shepherd and quickly settling himself on the seat of a four-wheel ATV. My jaw dropped as the Old Farmer bumped across the field toward us. Paralyzed for a moment, I watched in horrified disbelief as the staccato mutter of the ATV and the barking of the dog grew louder by the second.

The boys didn't wait for directions as they followed me down the path and off into the woods. When we felt safe enough to slow to a walk, the boys laughed at me,

because, for a moment, right before their watching eyes, the Old Farmer's magic had transformed me into a frightened 14-year-old boy once again. The humor of my son, a second-generation trespasser, being chased by the Old Troll from his garden hadn't gone unnoticed or unappreciated by the two boys. We laughed about it the rest of the way home. My laugh was, perhaps, a little more giddy than theirs, but they were generous enough not to tease me about it.

Of Roses, Rosaries, and a Year at Catholic School

My parents have been known to tell even casual acquaintances that I misplaced my moral compass somewhere in the seventh grade. They will add that, in their effort to arrest my accelerating free fall from grace, for my eighth-grade year they enrolled me at Holy Family, a Catholic school in the central Maine town where we had recently moved. But they continue to deny, both publicly and privately, that the results of their experiment proved, at best, inconclusive. I still contend that my parents' designs for my moral redemption mutated, instead, into a year of pleasant artifice and license.

We had lived many places during my father's military career; however, all were far from this place and time where and when nearly every child spoke both French and English equally poorly, and most parents spoke only French. I remember thinking that when the kids spoke English they sounded to my alien ear like the funny French skunk on the Saturday-morning cartoon. But I quickly detected the advantage my bilingual companions

had over the few merely lingual kids like me. They had to translate their report cards to their parents. And, of course, whatever might be inadvertently lost in the translation worked to the translator's advantage.

"You shoot left or right?" a boy with a thick accent asked me on my first day at the new school.

"What do you mean?" I asked back.

"Hockey sticks. Left or right?"

"I've never played hockey," I told him.

"We're going to shoot on the playground at recess," he said. "You can try different sticks and figure out which way you shoot then."

Out on the hot asphalt that day we determined that I shoot left. A few days later while coming in from recess, as I walked up the hill from the playground with the new stick and puck my parents bought me, I took a few lazy wrist shots against the side of the brick school building. As I snapped my wrists on the last shot, my eyes followed the hard rubber disk as it sailed wide to the right and through a first-floor window. When I looked through the hole in the glass, a shrouded figure framed in white glared back at me from an office chair. Mother Superior was still sitting at her desk, broken window over her shoulder, my new puck in her hand, when I went inside to reclaim it.

"Five hundred lines," she ordered as she handed me

my puck.

"Pardon me?" was all I could manage in response. I had no idea what the word "lines" in that context could possibly mean.

"Five hundred lines," she snapped at me. "I will not play hockey in the school yard. Five hundred. On my desk tomorrow morning."

"You get lines?" a new friend asked when he saw me in the hall.

"Five hundred," I told him.

"Use two pens on unlined paper," he said. "You only have to do two hundred and fifty that way. And if you ask Paula Pepin, she'll write some for you. They don't care who wrote them as long as you turn in the right number."

One of the first things I noticed about these particular Catholic school kids was that they didn't require a lengthy probation period prior to full membership in their order. I imagine that, because they had so little difficulty distinguishing "us" and "them," they easily offered up to newcomers their private codes and secret handshakes.

The next morning my coarsely printed lines alternated blue and red, the only two pens I could find. The last two hundred were written in swirling green script on pink notebook paper, and, instead of hard dots above the

i's, there were tiny green circles.

By far the most disconcerting thing to me about living in a small Catholic town and attending a Catholic school was that many of the priests had close relatives in the parish and probably grew up, if not in town, then, at least, close by. I soon discovered that this local familiarity could become a catalyst for awkward moments.

* * *

"Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. I went to confession. . . ."

"Hey, Robby!" the hazy outline on the other side of the screen greeted me. "How you doin'?"

"Okay, I guess," I whispered back. I recognized the silhouette and voice as those of a classmate's older brother.

"Go ahead," he prompted me.

"I went to confession last month. . . ." *As if you didn't know that, I thought to myself.* "And these are my sins." *Notice I didn't say all my sins.* "I hit my sister." *Not really, but that's pretty safe to confess.* *I did sneak up in the bell tower and throw pigeon eggs on the cars in the church parking lot.* "I told a few lies." *You might as well include the ones I'm telling now.* "I had impure thoughts." *Like the other night when I got to second base with Elaine Langelier on the bell-tower stairs.* "I disobeyed my parents." *Actually, Father, I*

couldn't feel much through her ski jacket. She probably doesn't even know I did it. "I cursed once or twice." Hey, here's a hypothetical for you, Father. If I didn't actually feel anything, do I still get credit for it? I mean, am I lying to my friends if I tell them I made it to second base? "And all the sins I can't remember." You really should lock the church after dark because kids come inside on cold nights to make out in the stairwell.

"Is that all?" he asks.

"Yes, Father."

"Say three Hail Marys and two Our Fathers," he tells me.

"Thank you, Father."

"See you next month," the priest quips cheerfully as I get up to leave.

I step out of the black booth and the next eighth-grader in line replaces me. I kneel down at the nearest pew where the padded bench is already pulled down and mumble into my hands five prayers that sound, even to my own ears, like one word:

Hailmaryfullofgracethelordiswiththeeblessedartthou
amongstwomenandblessedishefruitofthywombjesusholy
marymotherofgodprayforussinnersnowandatthehourofour
deathamen....Ourfatherwhoartinheavenhallowedbe....

* * *

In the corporate memory of Holy Family School I am

still, as far as anyone I know of can recall, the only student to have eaten dinner at the convent. Since I turned in my homework less than routinely, Sister Theresa, the math teacher, made me stay after school every night until I finished the assignment for her class. I suppose that, had I been a girl, I would have been permitted to work inside the convent, but, instead, I sat on the marble tiles in the foyer with my books spread out on a wooden pew. I dawdled over my homework so late one night that a nun brought me dinner.

Because it took so long for anyone to answer the door when I knocked, I made sure after my first afternoon in the foyer that I went to the bathroom at school before walking across the parking lot to the convent.

"Yes?" a middle-aged nun I had never seen before said as she opened the door.

"I have to go to the bathroom."

She looked puzzled.

"Sister Theresa made me come here to do my homework," I explained as I pointed to my books and papers scattered across the small foyer. "I have to go to the bathroom."

"I see. Come in."

Petrified, I stepped across the threshold of the convent but never lifted my gaze above the narrow line between the mystery nun's low black heels to my own

black-loafered toes. It was to me like walking into God's harem, a "Women Only" cloister for impotent yet, at the same time, omnipotent, sexless beings. It didn't help matters that I had a confusing schoolboy crush on one of the younger nuns.

So just as I was about to cloak myself in the ultimate feminine mystery, I pulled my hat over my eyes, so to speak. And since I never looked up, I own no personal recollection of what the inside of the convent looked like beyond the narrow pathway that led to the small bathroom.

Father, since I didn't really see anything, do I still get credit for peeing in a convent?

For some reason I associate this particular memory of the convent with my irrational fear of accidentally walking into a ladies' rest room. In fact, I have formed a mental ritual that I follow every time I go to public facilities. I never fail, for example, to double check the sign as I enter.

"Gen--tle--men," I read the sign slowly, deliberately sounding out each syllable in my head. That means "men," I affirm, and "men" means me, I assure myself.

* * *

After school one day a friend and I mashed some slushy snow into hard ice balls as we walked to his

house. Since the sidewalk went along a main street, we had plenty of passing targets on which to spend our ammunition.

Thump. Thump. Thud.

The iceballs pounded like hammers on empty barrels as they slammed against the sides of school busses. A few errant shots smashed into cars. One car pulled over to the side of the road, and a man waving a police badge at us jumped from the driver's seat.

"Were you boys throwing snowballs at those busses?"

"No, sir."

"I saw you doing it. Don't lie to me."

He took out a pad and pencil and started writing.

"You go to Holy Family?"

We nodded.

"What are your names?"

He looked at my friend first.

"Tarkenton. Fran Tarkenton," my friend said coolly.

The policeman never blinked.

"And you?"

I panicked.

"J-Jergenson," I stammered, "S-Sonny Jergenson," I added, thinking it best to stick with my friend's football theme.

He looked up from his pad at me.

"Spell that, Sonny."

"Uh, J-E-R-G-U- no, E not U, N-S-O-N."

"I will not throw snowballs at school busses," read our thousand lines in a liberal spectrum of colors and assortment of penmanships.

"Why didn't you pick a name you could spell?" my friend later asked me.

* * *

Throughout the year the nuns remained mysterious to me, but the priests eventually seemed more human and accessible. While hitchhiking the two miles home after a long afternoon in the convent foyer, I got picked up by a young priest driving a late-model Cadillac. I don't recall ever seeing a nun alone in public, much less a nun driving a Cadillac, but this priest, new to the Holy Family parish, didn't appear remarkably out of place to me.

"Where you headed?" he asked as I hopped in the passenger side.

"Home," I told him. "Just up here on Sabattus Street."

"Stay after school?"

"I had to do my math homework at the convent."

He reached down and turned on the car radio. A moment later he began to sing. I saw his eyes close and his head and shoulders begin to roll in time with the music. Both hands floated freely at his sides as he

maneuvered the big car down the road with one raised knee on the bottom of the steering wheel. As the car picked up speed, I became more than a little concerned as I watched him dance alone in the burgundy leather seat and listened to his rich baritone voice harmonize with the singer on the radio:

God didn't make little green apples
And it don't rain in Indianapolis. . . .

* * *

I never was much of a Catholic, really. I always had trouble with the idea of patron saints. If you are traveling, my parents told me, you pray to Saint Christopher. Although he fell out of favor for a while, in the interim we still prayed to him, just in case. In fact, like many Catholics, we had a miniature Saint Christopher statue that we kept on the car dashboard. The round magnet glued into the base kept it firmly attached to the dash. We travelled a lot, and when we got lost my father would pull over to the side of the road and stick the little statue on the end of the car hood. As I look back on it, I see now that my father would only pretend to be hopelessly disoriented. His feigned anxiety escalated until it eventually worked us kids into a hysterical frenzy. And then, when we were all crying, he would stop the car and calmly walk to the front of the hood with the little statue of St. Christopher. We watched him through

the windshield as he placed the statue on the hood, crossed himself, and bowed his head for a few moments in silent prayer. Then he would get back behind the wheel and cautiously follow the statue on the end of the hood, saying that it spoke to him and told him what roads to take. Of course, his ritual never failed to get us back on track.

One time when my dog was sick my mother looked through a book for the name of the patron saint of family pets. She didn't find it listed, so she and I knelt by the couch and prayed to Saint Christopher, asking him to relay the message that my dog was ill.

In addition to my difficulties with the panoply of patron saints, I found troublesome a wooden crucifix my parents kept on the wall of their bedroom. While taking wall hangings down for one of our many moves, I discovered in the back of the crucifix a hidden compartment. There, stored in cellophane, were two white candles and a glass vial of water.

"What are these for?" I excitedly asked my mother.

"Those are holy candles and holy water," she said.
"They're for emergency baptisms."

She further explained that if there happened to be a baby in the house who hadn't been baptized, and if the baby got mortally sick suddenly and we couldn't get it to a priest in time, we could just baptize it ourselves.

This, she said, would keep the baby's soul from going to Limbo. Limbo, of course, meant to me the game we always played at birthday parties. It took a while for her to untangle my rat's nest of ridiculous mental images. For years I thought of the candles and water hidden in the crucifix as a holy snakebite kit. Someday I would be alone in the house with an unbaptized baby, and I would save its soul from playing Limbo for eternity.

* * *

Regardless of my confusion about many things Catholic, during my year at Catholic school I did brush up against Catholic greatness. Bishop Somebody-or-Other came to town for Ash Wednesday, and all the parents, priests, and nuns made sure we kids went to Mass that day. The church was packed. Standing three-deep in the back were a hundred or so men who had given up seats with their families so that all of the women and children could have places in the pews. The time came to go to the altar, and we kids shuffled together down the center aisle. When a place opened up at the altar rail, I knelt down to wait for the bishop to come back around again. I recall thinking at the time that priests work altar-rail rituals as if they were eating corn on the cob. The people, like tightly packed kernels, bunch together in neat rows along the rail. The priest starts at one end of the cob and works all the way across, and then hurries

back to the beginning and works across the cob again.

"Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. And so to dust you shall return," I heard the bishop say to each person as he smudged ashes on their foreheads with his thumb.

"And so to dust you shall return," I said to myself. "There's a pleasant thought."

The death talk at the altar triggered memories of my grandfather's, my mother's father's, recent funeral. When I walked into the viewing room at the funeral parlor, the sweet pungency of the roses piled on top of the casket and around the room nearly swallowed me. Whenever people suggest to me that they like the smell of roses, I can only say that they remind me of funerals. My mother took the roses she and my father bought for the funeral to a nearby convent where retired nuns run a small business pressing flowers into rosary beads. I have no unsullied memories of either roses or rosaries.

"Ashes to ashes. Dust to dust. And so to dust you shall return," the bishop said to me as he smudged ashes on my forehead.

I bowed to pray, and he went on. After smudging a few more people, he came back to me, reverently placing one majestic hand on the top of my tilted, praying head. He bent low and whispered for a moment in my ear. I nodded, got up, and turned to go back up the aisle.

I had no idea why, but every adult eye in the church

stayed glued to me as I walked back to my seat. After a brief but dignified period of time my mother bent over to where I was kneeling and quietly asked me what the bishop had said. Still mystified and deeply embarrassed at the attention focused my way, I told her, "He said I could blow the ashes off my nose." Imagining that he had recognized in me holy potential or that he had conveyed to me a special blessing, curious people called our house all day to ask my mother what the bishop had whispered in my ear. I don't remember what she told them.

Many of the students went on to the public high school the next year. Just as many, however, went on to Saint Dominic's, the only Catholic high school in town. But a year was enough to convince my parents that, regardless of their schemes, I would remain an unredeemable desperado, and so I returned to public school.

I have kept in touch with many of those kids who, like me, are now well into their adult years. Perhaps because they learned at an early age to share selflessly with colleagues, or because they were readily generous to strangers, or, even more likely, because they discovered that it was at times in their best interest to cooperate with authority--for whatever reason or combination of reasons--most of the people I went to school with that year have prospered both socially and financially.

In 1994, with my teenage sons in tow, I visited what

used to be the Holy Family school. Although the building is still standing, the school itself closed about ten years ago, and the convent across the parking lot became the office complex for a credit union. I could still show the boys where I learned to play hockey and the window I shot the puck through and where I sat in the foyer to finish my math homework. As we went into the church, I showed them the stairwell to the bell tower. And as we walked up the still-familiar stairs, I told them about Paula Pepin, but I didn't mention Elaine Langelier.

The Bones of Childhood

I grew up hunting the Maine woods. The only birds I ever studied intently were pounding the air above the gold bead-sight of a shotgun. In stark contrast to what has been my fashion and history, the activity at my wife Cheryl's bird feeders has invited me to engage nature rather than collide with it.

As Thoreau says, hunting is "oftenest the young man's introduction to the forest, and the most original part of himself." My introduction was, however, not in my native Maine woods, but in New Hampshire where I shot my first bird--a song bird. I don't know what kind. I shot it with a BB gun. I was plinking a rusty can floating in a bog behind my uncle's house when the bird landed on a branch above me. My shot hit it in the chest, sending it fluttering to the ground at my feet. Horror-stricken, I stared into its blinking dark eyes, watching it die. I still remember very clearly the contrasts of the neatly layered feathers, the consonant hues of the colors, and the apparent order of the thing in general.

Although I knew it was one of millions like itself, as I knelt over the bird I sensed that it had a certain individuality about it, and I grieved for having killed it.

* * *

When I got a little older, I learned, rightly or wrongly, to discriminate between song birds and game birds, with the result that hunting became a major part of my fall calendar. In fact, when I was ten years old, my father gave me a 20-gauge single-barrel shotgun for my first communion present, the same shotgun that later in the day turned my shoulder black and blue and, then, bloodied my younger brother's nose when the stiff recoil slammed the thumb release back into his face.

Because we lived on the edge of town, when I was old enough to hunt on my own, I had only to walk out our back door and into the woods behind our house before loading my shotgun. My high school friends often kept their guns at my house because it was so close to our hunting ground.

Late each summer my friends and I would pore over the new regulation book, marking on the calendar when woodcock, grouse, and pheasant season opened and closed. We paid particular attention to the chart in the back of the pocket-size manual that listed the hours and the minutes of official sunrise and sunset, the time in between comprising the legal hunting days. We were

especially cautious about the time, because the game warden had spooked us early one evening as we walked out of the woods after dark. We were legal that night, but not deliberately so. Our guns were unloaded only because we had fired all our shells. We learned quickly to think of the game warden the same way we already thought of the school principal--as an authority figure who shouldn't know our names.

I recall that it seemed so unfair to us that football season should conflict with hunting season. At least when we were still junior-varsity players, our games were played on Friday nights. That should have left Saturdays open for us to go hunting, except that we were still required to dress out for the varsity games on Saturday afternoons. Since we rarely got into a varsity game, we felt free to spend the mornings of home games hunting. We would often stay in the woods so long that we did not have time to change from our hunting clothes before we arrived at the locker room. There we quickly swapped our heavy jackets full of sandwich wrappers and shotgun shells for freshly laundered game jerseys and elastic pants. Newly blackened game cleats made room on the floor beneath our lockers for our muddy boots. During the fall of my freshman and sophomore years, many a weary Saturday afternoon I was grateful that I was riding the plank.

On the rare school day when we did not have football practice, we would all take the school bus to my house. After piling books in the corner, my friends would quickly change into whatever old clothes my mother could pull from my father's closet and dresser. Then she would stuff sandwiches and cookies into our jacket pockets, remind us to be careful, wish us well, and watch us through the kitchen window as in synchronized silence we faded into the woods behind the house.

When it wasn't legal to hunt anything else, we would fruitlessly hunt crows. We never actually shot a crow. Neither, as I recall, did we ever get within reasonable range to shoot at one, but we did blunder across a wounded crow once. The bird seemed healthy enough except for a slightly damaged wing where it had obviously been hit with bird shot. As it hopped along the ground, I caught it in my shirt and carried it back to my house. I built a cage in the basement from a cardboard box and fed the bird bread, milk, and water--because I had no idea what else it might want to eat. Not knowing the difference between a common raven (*Corvus corax*) and its smaller cousin the American crow (*Corvus brachyrhynchos*), I named him Poe. After about two weeks, in spite of my zealous care, Poe got better, and I released him. I never hunted crows again after that.

Many years later when I brought a pheasant home and

proudly spread it out on the table, my older son, then five years old, commented on how pretty the bird looked.

After a closer inspection, he asked me, "Is it dead?"

"Yes," I said.

"How did it die?"

"I shot it," I proudly replied.

"Why?"

"I was hunting."

"Do they hurt children?"

"No," I laughed.

"Then why did you kill it?" he asked with an inquiring earnestness, not, I think, being critical of me, but simply desiring to know why I would kill such a lovely creature. I didn't then know why I had killed it.

I hunted for a few more seasons after that but never again with the same enthusiasm.

Perhaps Thoreau stumbled onto something when he noticed that a boy often "goes thither at first as a hunter and fisher, until at last, if he has the seeds of a better life in him, he distinguishes his proper objects, as a poet or naturalist it may be, and leaves the gun and the fish-pole behind." Although I still hear their siren call from time to time, the gun and the fish-pole gather dust.

* * *

After many moves with the military, my family and I settled in northeastern Kansas in a house that borders a small wood. In the back yard Cheryl has set out a waterer and several types of feeders to accommodate the various ground-, platform-, and perch-feeding birds. She has even put out an array of devices for keeping the squirrels fed and occupied so that they won't disturb the feathered folk. She has named most of the regular visitors: Ricky and Lucy Ricardinal; a red-bellied woodpecker too obviously named Woody; Leo, the yellow-bellied sapsucker; Morton, a downy woodpecker; and Spot, White-Ears, and Spaz, the squirrels. Some names she derives from obvious physical features, while others are word-plays or merely descriptive of behavior.

Spaz, for instance, has a singularly odd personality. He plays with sticks in the yard the way cats play with bits of ribbon on the living-room carpet. Sometimes he will lie on his side with one end of a stick in his mouth and the middle held tightly between his front paws while he kicks at it with his hind feet. If the crafty stick happens to escape his grasp, he pounces on his poor prey like a cat on an unfortunate field mouse. Or, he might just playfully crawl to it on his side, dragging his fully extended body along the grass with his stretched-out front paws.

When Spaz isn't battling sticks, he dashes from one

spot on the lawn to another far across the yard for no apparent reason other than to mock me--as if to say that all my mad dashing about is just from one phantom crisis to another. Then, when he is bored with his imaginary meetings, chasing his tail, playing with a stick, and jumping up and down on a leaf, he charges through groups of gathered birds, not to be mean to them, I think, but rather to enjoy the feathered flurry of activity and, for a brief moment, to experience the universe from an exploding center of sight and sound. He routs flocks of birds for the same reason we light the whole string of firecrackers rather than just one at a time.

"Bob," Spaz breathlessly chides me when I walk in the yard, "remember to chase the birds."

Leo, the yellow-bellied sapsucker, is another odd character. Cheryl explained his name to me, "Yellow is for cowards; there is a cowardly lion in the Wizard of Oz; Leo is a good name for a lion."

Compared to most of the other birds, Leo looks as if he were assembled by a sullen kindergartener whose teacher gave him only drab-colored paints, slick brown clay, and lost feathers gathered from the playground. The child's only instruction: "Make a bird."

Leo's feathers are ragged and nappy. He always looks like he just woke up, or like whoever painted him couldn't stay inside the lines. He is an uninspired

bird, a thoughtless, lonely curmudgeon, an old and cranky bachelor. The kind of bird I would have made as a child. Even after he has eaten his fill, he jealously guards the feeder. I suspect that if it were possible he would fence in all the feeders, claiming that he owned them. If I could speak sapsucker, I would ask him, "Can we ever own anything?" Then, from my privileged comfort, preach, "We are only renters here."

* * *

Cheryl's constructed world is filled with showy cardinals, delicate creepers, and royal kinglets. However, the blues of the bluejays, like the colors of the other birds, match, blend, and contrast in ways that, unless she points them out to me, I would neither notice nor appreciate. She has also remarked that these jays, with their bellicose personalities, are the swaggering storm-troopers of the bird-feeder world. It seems that one advance-guard jay slashes through the yard screaming his arrival notice and scaring off the more timid folks with his loud and abrasive alarm, while, shortly after, the rest of the jays blast in amidst a flurry of pretentious fanfare and blitzkrieg enthusiasm. The regulars at the feeders have learned to ignore the bluejays' impotent bluster and hardly raise an eyebrow anymore.

The tiny nuthatches remain an enigma to me. Red and brown and gray and chatty, they came the first day Cheryl

put out the feeders. Unlike all the other birds, the nuthatches don't leave when we walk around in the yard or even while we refill the feeders. I wonder what they see or, more important, what they don't see. Don't they understand that we could reach out and grab them from our few inches away? In some insidious way they seem to dismiss us as if we are irrelevant. But it's more as if we are immaterial, and they are simply unaware of our presence.

I find no comfort or amusement anymore in what I once considered the nuthatches' friendly approachability. I have learned that I am not the subject of their chatter. I am invisible, and I am insulted. I ask myself, "Am I immaterial because I am irrelevant?" If I reached out a fist and smashed a nuthatch, would I then be relevant? I suspect that in their parochial world, smashing a nuthatch or two might make me material, but it would take generations of smashing to impress my relevance into their genetic coding. Even when at the base of the tree sits the neighbor's cat, cloaked in materiality and crowned in relevance, the nuthatches go about their business, chattering their odd "Ank, Ank, Ank" to each other as if the world were made up of only nuthatches.

I thought of the nuthatches the other day when an obviously destitute man approached me on a downtown sidewalk. Each time that I stepped aside to avoid him,

he deftly matched my step to intercept me. Finally, when I saw that I could not pass him, I stopped to let him by. But he did not want by. He stopped directly in front of me, leaned forward, and stared into my face. Finally, when I stared back, he walked away, satisfied. With my return stare I had acknowledged his existence. We both knew that, even if my stare did not give him relevance, it at least gave him substance. And now that he has gained substance in my nuthatch world, I worry that he will require, or perhaps demand, relevance the next time we meet. I wonder what his relevance will cost me. It will certainly be more than another stare. Ank. Ank. Ank.

* * *

After a light overnight snowfall, Cheryl and I watched from our bedroom window a merlin, a small falcon, eat a bird that it had killed beside one of Cheryl's feeders. We couldn't tell what kind of bird it was because the merlin was standing on his prey, wings partly spread around it to protect it from who knows what. The merlin (eventually Cheryl just named him Merlin) warily but vigorously ripped dark gray feathers from the dead bird's chest. After plucking his breakfast, he ate the breast meat and then the entrails before carrying the carcass off a few yards into the woods. I went outside to inspect the feathers lying in a neat, bloodless circle

on the snow to see if any were recognizable. After my report back that all the feathers were grey and black, Cheryl told me that it was probably just a common grackle. I asked her about the wider implications of that assessment.

"What do you mean by 'common'?" I asked. "Is it all right with you that Merlin eat the common grackle but not the common cardinal?"

Seeing where I was going with this challenge, she said that it was probably the same line of reasoning that invites news reporters to say things like, "A plane crashed today in Brazil, killing all passengers on board. None were American."

"Besides," I interrupted her, "grackles aren't very pretty birds. So what if the news announcer said that all were killed, but none were very good-looking?"

"Look," she said indignantly as she stalked from the room, "as long as he doesn't kill any birds I recognize, then I suppose it's all right with me."

Only my voice followed her. "All were killed, but you don't know any of them!" I thought of this conversation a few months later when I read Aldo Leopold's words: "We grieve only for what we know."

If I were a kindergartener again, after failing at making sapsuckers, I would make sparrows. I say that because sparrows are small and require only one color. I

would need only one small lump of clay per sparrow and only one shade of brown paint for a whole flock. I would make sparrows for no other reason than I am neither clever nor ambitious enough to make bluejays or cardinals or creepers.

However, if it were left to people to make the birds, I would have to decline. Instead, I would idly watch as my wife works among the most skillful artisans. She shapes one cardinal she names Spike for his fashionable coif; his girlfriend she calls Duchess for her regal bearing; a bluejay she names Kaiser for his blustery militant air, and on and on, until the world is steeped in color and sound and personality.

* * *

Since I had little interest in birds prior to my wife's setting up her feeders, when I sat down to record this story I imagined that it would end about here. But somehow, I find myself returning to the account because it seems that the story itself resists an ending. I see now why those who write about such things cannot report on a season but feel compelled to continue the record for at least an annual cycle. And even then, when the words on the pages come to an end, the story goes on without them.

If I am accurately to record Leo's part in our local drama, I must mention that he suddenly disappeared in

early spring. I worried for days that the neighbors' cat got him, but Cheryl reassured me that sapsuckers are migratory. He probably left for his summer home, she told me. What struck me as so strange about his departure was its suddenness. He didn't at first miss one day at the feeder, and two days, and then three as he weaned himself from Cheryl's care. He just left. The obvious question for someone like me is how did this grumpy monk know when it was time to go? How does he know where to go? And will he bring his tousled self back in the fall?

My older son turns seventeen in a few months. Lately I have noticed a new, faraway look in his eyes. I sense that, like Leo, he also is feeling a growing need to be somewhere else. Perhaps for him, as with Leo, that compelling need to be somewhere else trumps the desire for a steady meal and a friendly hand. I can only hope that Leo will complete the cycle by returning in the fall, but must resign myself to the idea that he may not return at all. While he is away, I wonder if he is well and what he is seeing and doing.

* * *

I have a plan that someday I will take one of my sons or, perhaps, a grandson or granddaughter and drive as far north into Canada as the roads will take us. We will note the flora and fauna along the way. It may be that we will find the summer nesting grounds of the birds

we see here only in winter. Perhaps we will discover what the universe does not offer us in the Midwest. Scott Russell Sanders challenges this notion that I must go elsewhere to experience nature. "There are no privileged locations," he says. And he adds,

If you stay put, your place may become a holy center, not because it gives you special access to the divine, but because in your stillness you hear what might be heard anywhere. All there is to see can be seen from anywhere in the universe, if you know how to look; and the influence of the entire universe converges on every spot.

Cheryl spreads out seed and water, arranging for the birds the provisions the universe already supplies them elsewhere. Instead of going elsewhere, each bird in its season beats a path to her door. And when I go camping, uncoerced by me, the quiet lights of heaven beat a path to my door even as the warming light of my campfire snaps back to them across the cold expanse an equally silent salute. But the point remains, whether I pitch my tent in Kansas, New Hampshire, or Montana, the night blossoms, always in season, decorate my night. Even as I say that, I recognize my mistake. All the night lights of winter are not all the ones of summer. Like the birds, some stay over, while others migrate beyond my horizon.

Soon after Leo's departure, the creepers and junkos left also. Of course, other birds who had wintered farther south came north to take their place. They and

the birds who stayed started nesting. Ricky and Lucy set up house in the small conifer on the sunny side of the garage. Wrens settled in the broken light above the porch. And a robin couple threaded together a twig and flotsam nest about fifteen feet up the maple in the front yard. After the robins completed construction, I climbed up the tree to act as both building inspector and census taker. First trip: four blue eggs. Second trip: four bald chicks. Third trip: two plump fledglings. No sign of the other two, and no one in the nest looking the least bit guilty or concerned. I have a feeling that I don't want to know what happened.

One evening, shortly after the nesting started, Cheryl opened the window to check on a raucous squawking in the yard. What she found was Merlin in the conifer with Ricky and Lucy. She tore out the front door and ran through the yard to the side of the garage where she screamed bloody murder up the tree at Merlin and eventually rattled him out of the nest.

"He has to eat, too!" I kidded her from the front porch.

"Not in my restaurant," she said.

But Merlin still comes through the yard from time to time, unannounced and, of course, uninvited. I never cease to be amazed at how he noiselessly drops from the sky like a falling whisper. Ripping through the dense

woods in the back yard, his flying appears less like a deft display of aerobatics than a very dangerous experiment in bird ballistics. When he flies a low pass through the yard, the only sounds are the startled shrieks of the frightened natives, as if a dragon had suddenly swooped down on a sleepy hamlet. Like Spaz, who joyfully scatters feeding flocks by running through them, Merlin often buzzes through the village just to watch the natives run for cover.

I read once, or perhaps heard somewhere, that birds of prey sometimes will--for the lack of a better phrase--"count coup" rather than kill a potential meal. I think the story went that they will swoop from the sky and knock swimming ducks on the head with curled-under talons, as if to say, "Perhaps you should be more vigilant. After all, it's a dangerous world out here." As I say, I heard it or read it many years ago and have no idea whether it is true or not. Even if it isn't true, it should be. Regardless of how often Merlin benignly counts coup, he keeps the natives on edge by regularly treating the yard as his private fast-food restaurant. Perhaps I'm mistaken and he isn't counting coup at all. Maybe he's just coming through to see what Cheryl has on the menu.

Nevertheless, I can't help but be impressed at how Merlin darts among the trees on windy days, weaving his

way through the dancing branches with all the skillful intensity of a cocky young fighter pilot drunk on immortality. He forgets that routine heroism cannot go unpunished forever. Physics will yield to statistics, Mars to Icarus, and biology to botany, bird and bone eventually becoming one with branch and bark.

* * *

Perhaps I have watched too much nature lately and, whether I intended to or not, drawn too many private conclusions from my observations. Emerson would not be surprised at my soft turn. In his essay "Nature" he proposes, "The moral law lies at the centre of nature and radiates to the circumference. It is the pith and marrow of every substance, every relation, and every process. All things with which we deal, preach to us."

And as I reflect on the masculine pattern of my life prior to my wife's patient, gentling influence, I sense, not loss, but an early and, for me, a necessary incompleteness: man, but hardly human. She has shown me that I can feel pleasure in contact with the world outside my skin without colliding with it. Others may be perfectly whole alone and without such influences. I cannot be. I have always preferred and needed a companion.

And then I think back to short winter days when I would hunt the snowy woods of Maine--snowshoes, shotgun, malamute, and boy--boy and dog wholly agreeing that if we

could hunt rabbits forever in these deep snows and not get tired, we would never do anything else. However, as I recall, long before a winter day could break our bones and suck our marrow, it would drive us from the idle woods. Surrounded by powdered water, enough to drown in under the wrong circumstances, we were often whipped home, not by fatigue, but by hunger and thirst.

Many winter days, just because we could, we would leave the house in the teeth of a nor'easter with nothing but our fur, our warmest clothes, and snowshoes. We would fix ourselves to the leeward side of a big pine tree and listen to the wind howl around our ears. As the snow piled up around us, I hunkered down ever warmer in the deepening well of the pine. My husky would either settle himself comfortably into my lap or curl up on top of my snowshoes into a tight ball, a bowed shelf of warm, stacking whiteness. The fine hard spray of the snow, like blowing white sand, stung our eyes shut, while the seductive perfume of comfort and cold lured us to an everlasting sleep. "This is the hour of Lead--," Emily Dickinson wrote, "Remembered, if outlived, / As freezing persons, recollect the Snow-- / First--Chill--then Stupor--then letting go--."

Eventually the great dogs of childhood die, and the bones of childhood break. The boy steps from the well of the pine, his desires forever changed.

Dead Cats, Appliances as Metaphors for Lasting
Relationships, Other Piffle, and Meteors

The smiling young girl working the grocery-store cash register recognized the last name on my check as that of my son, her high school classmate. She perched her chin on her palms, rocking forward on her elbows as she leaned over the counter toward me.

"Except for all the gray hair," she said in a high, sweet voice, "and those bags under your eyes, I would never guess you were the father of a teenager."

"I got started early," I quipped, thinking that my response was clever.

As I walked away from the counter, I realized my reply made no sense at all, but I don't think she noticed. I like to think that she had formed a muddled premise about my appearance that, in turn, led her to a muddled conclusion regarding my age. Then again, maybe not.

But if so, I am much like her in ways. I can quickly stretch things out in my mind to seemingly

logical conclusions or track a thing back to what might be a foundational premise--a marginal talent that often gets me into trouble. Cheryl, my wife, will tell you that I too often skip intermediate squares in my hasty sprint to the end of the logical sidewalk. Is this curious?--my desire to see the ends of something clearly, I mean, not my habit of overlooking mitigating facts.

I'm the one who always observes that a kitten too soon becomes a cat. The undeniably adorable, mewling wisp of fur transforms overnight, it seems, into a free-loading furniture vandal who sprays the rug and shreds the corners of expensive sofas, doing both while looking you straight in the eye.

"Pets can be as much trouble as children," I often point out.

I am also the one who mentions to owners of new cars that their car decreased in value by one-third the moment they drove it from the lot. Someone has to be the prophet of such things. Imagine what the world would be like if no one took that risk. If some things really go without saying, two of those things must be that children don't flock to me, and I often bring down the conversation at parties. But this isn't necessarily about cats and has nothing at all to do with cars. It's about premises and conclusions and a little bit about piffle.

Since the "high art" of great essays doesn't

necessarily lend itself to easily recognizable central themes or even to coherent relationships among various ideas, I feel compelled to provide a few patronizing clues up front. This first story, for instance, seems to be about how one can misjudge the innocence of youth, but it's really about cats.

It was a brisk Saturday afternoon in October. We were living in Montana at the time. Cheryl was away doing girl things or something, I forget. But I do recall that she left me in sole command of the home and our two boys. Always a dangerous time. The last time she was away for the day, we ate two boxes of ice cream sandwiches for supper, then a box of Nutty Buddies for dessert. But today, between lunch and supper, I lay stretched out in a sunbeam on the bedroom carpet. Tai, my wife's Siamese cat, had moved to the sunbeam on the bed. The football game on the black and white TV and I were fading in and out in a well-choreographed dream dance as I napped my way through my afternoon responsibilities.

Knock. Knock.

I ignored the first knocks on the half-closed bedroom door.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

I ignored these knocks also.

"Dad," my elder son whispered through the door.

"Go away."

Bobby, normally compliant, stuck his runny nose in the door. Bobby was seven at the time, three years older than Mike.

"Come see this!" he sniffed.

Even through groggy eyes I could see that he had his stocking hat on inside out. The halfway-down zipper talon on his pants stuck out underneath his wrinkled, untucked shirt. As my mind cleared, I thought to myself that I had better get my parental act together before Cheryl got home.

"Where's Mike?" I asked.

"Eating lunch with Adam at Miss Debbie's. Come see what we found!"

Bobby scooted down the hall and outside as I shuffled my way to the front door. When I looked out, I saw there with Bobby two round-eyed neighbor kids, a brother and sister, the girl a little younger and smaller than the two boys. All three, with runny noses and untied sneakers, were standing around my son's rusty red wagon, alternately looking at a cat lying in the wagon and then smiling up at me. The cat was big, black, and very dead. Its frozen paws stuck straight out from underneath its furry body, and its tail stood up as if the cat had fallen over dead while merrily walking across a kitchen floor.

"Can we keep him?" Bobby asked.

It occurred to me that Bobby had no experience with death, human or animal. I didn't know about the other kids. I felt a pressing responsibility as the on-site adult to break the news gently that the only way they were going to be able to keep this cat was in the freezer. Thinking carefully about what I should say, I inched nearer to the children and scrunched down on my calves to shatter their uninitiated little hearts at eye level.

"Bobby, we already have a cat and this one is dead."

"No, he isn't. If we get him warm and feed him, he'll be all right."

Which reminds me of another cat story. Several summers ago Cheryl took the boys away for a few weeks while I finished a project for work. Her parting words when she rolled down the window before backing from the driveway went as follows: "Bob, lovest thou me?" she asked in a very serious tone in her best King-James-Version-of-the-Bible English.

"You know that I love you," I said, keeping with the spirit of things.

"Feed my cat," she said as she rolled up the car window and drove away. I had a history of forgetting to feed the cat. As I looked down at the wagon, I thought that perhaps someone had forgotten to feed this cat.

"Bobby, he's not cold, and he's not hungry. He's dead. Animals get stiff like that when they've been dead for a few days."

He thought for a moment, then looked up at me as if he had something important to say but just didn't quite know how to put it into words.

"He's dead?" he offered as kind of half-question, half-statement premise.

"Yes, Bobby. He's dead."

"Then I can keep his skull?" he concluded.

* * *

I have reached some conclusions myself. This past summer Cheryl left with the boys to visit her parents. As soon as she drove away, I fed her cat and went camping. Since it was the peak night for an annual meteor shower, I wanted to get as far away as I could from the city lights. But it didn't look like it was going to matter much because of the cloud cover and the forecast for thunderstorms. In spite of the forecast, I pitched my tent in the late afternoon and settled down with a book, waiting for it to get dark and hoping for the best.

As the sun set, I watched two twin storms as they moved in side-by-side from the northwest like giant, thick-limbed trolls purposefully rumbling their way to flatten my campsite. Soon these two trolls were joined

by growling, heavy-footed companions to the west and east. All were busily firing yellow javelins at each other without resting for even a moment from their violent quarrel. It wasn't long before the trolls surrounded me on three sides, like one of those wrap-around big-screen theaters at theme parks, the ones with the two-story-tall speakers. But as the evening approached, the battling trolls left a perfectly clear patch of white stars directly over my campsite. I opened the front windows of the car so I could hear the classical station better on the car stereo, then propped myself on the car hood and leaned back on the windshield, facing the northern trolls.

Soon the show started. Every few moments a pale green meteor would streak in from the north through the arms of the lumbering trolls and silently end its life in the starry patch above me. On the car stereo, Tchaikovsky's *1812 Overture* joined the surreal thunderous symphony. It was the most dream-like moment I have ever spent completely awake. At times I forgot to breathe. Other times I was afraid to move, fearing that if I did, I would wake, and it would all vanish. I imagined that if moments like this were possible, then surely there must be a God. It was self-evident.

But nothing is self-evident. I believe that. Nature, in itself, neither satisfactorily proves that God

exists nor proves that God does not exist. As I thought of this, I recalled having the exact same feeling while on a business trip to Moscow. While there, I went to the Bolshoi Ballet. The ballerinas were as precise and thinly delicate as fine sable paintbrushes moving silently across an exotic canvas. The only sounds were the melodies and cacophonies of the orchestra and the slapping of boots and thighs as Cossacks danced across the wooden stage. It would surely require a benevolent God to create in one universe the Bolshoi Ballet and this moment with Tchaikovsky, the trolls, and the meteors.

* * *

Cheryl is a neonatal intensive care nurse, all math and science while I am all literature and history. Frost would say she "is all pine and I am all apple orchard." She called me from the hospital to ask me to come see a 13-ounce premature baby girl. The newborn baby girl was breathing without a respirator and apparently doing just fine. Cheryl doesn't mind telling you that little girls are made of sturdier stuff than little boys.

"Four sticks of butter minus six tablespoons," she said to give me an idea of how little 13 ounces is. "Arms and legs as thin as Slim Jims. Her name is Maxine," she added, "but I say she's too small to be named Max-anything."

She also had two boys in unit with the same name--

Dakota. After several confusing days of getting the boys mixed up, she moved one boy's isolette to the north wall of the unit and the other to the south wall. Then she made new name tags for them--North and South Dakota.

In spite of Cheryl's learned opinion regarding the natural feebleness of boy children, her poetic food-to-baby comparisons, and her observations on the subtle ironies of baby names, she never discusses with me anything of real or imagined importance if she cannot see my eyes. She needs to see them, she says, to tell when I am teasing her.

"Eyes work both ways," she says to me, adding, "especially yours," as she reaches over to lift my sunglasses.

When our washing machine broke a few months ago, I wanted to get a new one, but she insisted that we get the old one repaired. I asked her why, and she told me that it was because we had owned the washer since shortly after we were married, and to her it was kind of a metaphor for our relationship. I was speechless.

It is old, reliable, and sturdy, she told me. It's low-maintenance, she added, requiring only simple adjustments or minor repairs every few years. I said that it leaks and often gets out of balance. Then I asked her if she had metaphors for any other appliances that I should know about.

We will be lying in bed at night in the darkness, and she will make me turn toward her to talk. What does she want to see? I know she can't see my face because I know I can't see hers. It's a curious, spooky feeling. When I can't stop her, does her spirit leap across my words and enter me through my eyes? When she is in me, does she walk through my dark places until she finds the poems I will not write? Does she read my soul?

I have a silly premise. I feel that I must cover the words with my hand as I scribble notes to her during church, so she can't read the words as I write them. My superstition is that there is a connection between the letters inking from my pen and the dark room where I keep my spirit safely shackled. My evidence for this belief is that greeting-card companies exist. Giving cards, where someone else inscribes the sentiment, requires nothing of you. That is why mothers prefer crayon Mother's day cards and why Cheryl likes the bad poetry I write for her. I don't set out to write bad poetry, it just happens. It's a gift, I suppose. I used to think it was the effort that went into these presents that made the presentee so happy. But it's much more than that. It's sharing in the creation of something that did not exist before that creative moment.

Cheryl is even proud of my bad poems. Like she doesn't know that they are smarmy doggerel. She keeps

them in a hat box along with her other treasures such as locks of baby hair and baby teeth the Tooth Fairy purchased with quarters and nickels from tiny sneakers beside the boys' beds. The boys began putting their teeth in their shoes because the Tooth Fairy had a difficult time finding the tiny teeth under their pillows.

"Never show this to anyone," I order her as I hand over another poem. I mean it.

"But it's wonderful," she says with a slight flush in her cheeks. And I can tell by the misty look in her eyes she believes what she is saying. And soon, in spite of my warning, I can tell that all her girlfriends have read it. Their voices are different if I answer the phone. They say my name, Bob, with two syllables and with that raised inflection on the end that a girl uses when she thinks you're sweet.

My premise is that when I'm not vigilant, maybe while I'm sleeping, Cheryl trespasses into my soul's garden to rearrange my flower beds and to pull up my cherished weeds and thistle. She plants roses to choke out my wild flowers. When she is finished for the day, she will walk up my garden path and into the back door of my secret house. She changes the music on my soul's stereo from a ghastly dissonant chatter to a quiet ballad recorded in her own voice:

I don't think I remember when we met.
I don't think I have any reason to forget
The world that's driven you to me
And made my story of you,
The time I spent tellin' you
That I really love you.
Do you know the place I've made for you?
And do you know the back streets I've gone
through
To find that time is not your friend
And what I must uncover
To understand the life you've lived?
If life is not your lover, let me know
The changes you have made.
Love, I am alone
And I am not afraid
To walk the world with anyone
And never walk it crying,
To live my life with all the world
And never live it lying.
(Jimmy Dale Gilmore)

It isn't that she doesn't have music from her own soul to share. It's just that her lyrics rhyme too much with reality for my taste. Now, however, even if we are having lunch in some glary fast-food sunroom, even if we're both sitting on the same side of the booth, if I think of it, I take off my sunglasses.

Why I Won't Fight Women

In spite of everything that's gone on, it's still a man's world, I'm glad to say. A common self-blessing in the man cult at our house is "It's great to be me."

Just walk in the door to our house and get a good whiff of the air: three parts testosterone to one part Estée Lauder. And in an old-fashioned, traditional home like ours, the man gets the final say in everything that matters.

Nonetheless, in nearly twenty years of marriage I have managed to exercise my right to "the final say" only twice. The first time I volunteered for airborne jump school at Fort Benning, Georgia.

When Cheryl asked me why a married man with two children felt compelled to jump from airplanes, I offered the most authoritative support.

"John 1:1," I said, "A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do," quoting from the book of John the Wayne, of course, and not John the Apostle.

She cynically countered, "Yeah, how about John 1:2?"

Life's tough. It's tougher if you're stupid," repeating the caption from my favorite John Wayne poster.

We had a similar exchange recently when I broke the news that I had purchased a Harley. She had sold my sporty little Honda several years ago after I nearly became the hood ornament for an on-coming truck. Of course, she might not have taken such a drastic unilateral step if my older son had not been on the bike with me at the time.

"No blood, no foul," I said to my son as I pulled the bike back into our lane. "So there's no reason we need to mention this to your mom."

When we got home, Cheryl could tell by the excitement in his eyes that something was up. And when she put the pressure on him, he spilled his guts, of course.

"Married men with children don't ride motorcycles," she explained to me a few weeks later when I found my Honda missing.

So to prove my own point and to re-establish my authority as the man of the house, instead of replacing my little bike with just another chimp, this time around I bought King Kong, 1200 cc's of rolling black thunder. I broke the big news to Cheryl a couple of days after I surprised her with a new car.

* * *

I don't care what the growing pile of evidence might

show, men are different from women, especially when it comes to sports. A friend of mine recently attended a women's varsity softball game at the university in our town. He told me that one of the players tipped a foul ball that smacked her in the forehead.

"She sat right down in the batter's box," my friend said, "sat right down and started crying. You'd never catch a guy doing that, not unless he got hit in the nose," he went on. "You can't help crying if you get hit in the nose."

* * *

One day while playing volleyball at a sports outing, my older son, Bobby, and I, from opposite sides of the court, went for a ball hovering above the net in perfect spike position for both of us. Unfortunately for my son, he is taller, quicker, and springier than me. He hit the ball a split second before I did, and all I hit were his open fingers.

The impact of the blow spun me around. I saw the ball land on the floor at my feet as I nervously glanced over my shoulder to see if I had hurt Bobby. Sure enough, there he was, kneeling on the floor, his right hand holding his left wrist, his left thumb obviously snapped in half between the two joints.

"You broke my thumb," he said with a pained expression, adding quickly, "Who got the point?"

"You did," I said. "Let's go to the hospital."

I couldn't have been more proud if it had been his bar mitzvah, because today he was a man. Not because he didn't cry, but because, even with his thumb pointed in several directions, what really mattered to him was who got the point.

On the way to the hospital he called Cheryl from the car phone.

"Dad broke my thumb."

"Yeah, right," I heard her say. Being a nurse, Cheryl doesn't often express compassion for our imagined injuries. "I've seen sick people," she will tell us, "and you're not one of them." In addition, her knee-jerk response is to dismiss everything we say as being just another childish prank.

Once we got her to believe we were actually on the way to the hospital, she insisted that I bring Bobby by the house so she could assess the situation first. After seeing the distorted thumb, convinced that we did indeed have a medical situation, she rode with us to the emergency room.

Walking in with the x-ray, the doctor, a tall, lanky, athletic man, asked Bobby, "How'd you do this?"

"Playing volleyball," Bobby explained. "My dad and I went up for a spike at the same time."

"Who got the point?" the doctor asked.

"I did," Bobby said.

"Great," the doctor said. "That's what matters."

Simultaneously, Bobby and I turned to Cheryl with knowing looks, saying, "See, he understands."

* * *

Watching my younger son's eighth-grade wrestling matches this year, I concluded, after viewing the brutish physicality and the smash-mouth maulings going on before me, that, if there were no men in the world, it would certainly never occur to a righteous woman to invent wrestling. I mean, every second kid was bleeding from somewhere. But there happened to be one girl on my son's team, not a delicate little petal either, but a prominently full-figured young lady.

Early in the season Jackie grappled with a clean-cut doughy young buck from a neighboring school. Had the lad not been minding his manners, he might have lasted a few minutes longer than he did, but from the outset it was apparent to everyone in the gymnasium that this poor sap was going to lose a wrestling match to a girl. Not just lose on points, either--he was going to get pinned.

The boys on my son's team cheered Jackie on to victory, but the magnitude of the other boy's defeat wasn't lost on any of them. When Jackie won, the boys stood up and applauded enthusiastically, just as they would for any other wrestler on the team. But when they

sat back down, their heads dropped in unison. Their hang-dog expressions displayed both the corporate humiliation brought on by the fall of a comrade-in-gender and gratefulness to God that they weren't him.

I overheard one veteran wrestler summarize the situation to the boy sitting next to him: "That kid might as well quit school."

* * *

Once in the sixth grade I smarted off to a girl who then proceeded to beat me up. At recess, no less. Out on the playground. In front of the whole school. She didn't actually punch me. Punching me wouldn't have been humiliating enough. Instead, she knocked me down. And every time I stood up, she knocked me down again. Finally, I just sat on the ground at her feet while she towered over me, fists on her hips, daring me to get back up. I never smarted off to a girl after that.

I still tell myself I could have taken any other girl in the sixth grade; it was just my singular misfortune to smart off to the wrong one. Six years later, after I had played two years of junior high football and four years of high school football, that girl still stared me down in the halls at school.

But it's a man's world, I say, and I won't be held accountable for every anomaly.

* * *

Just recently, a rather sporty woman in my writing group, a woman perhaps forty pounds lighter than me, challenged me to a boxing match. She has her own gloves, which I casually commented on when the group met at her apartment. What I thought was a benign comment led to her challenge. I told her that I would not fight her.

"Why not?" she asked.

"I have nothing to gain," I said. "If I beat you, what can I say? Who could I tell? I boxed with and beat a woman. A woman much smaller than me. On the other hand, if I lose. . . ."

She got the point. And besides, I thought to myself, what if she hit me in the nose?

"Peeing Is Like Paychecks"

"I can't exaggerate my admiration for Cheryl. Imagine how difficult it must have been for her to go to school while raising three children on her own." (My last boss at my going-away party. Cheryl and I have two children.)

Cheryl, my wife, can say the most astonishing things sometimes, especially when she's tired. Talk to her after a third nightshift in a row at the hospital, and besides accusing me of trying "to pull the sheep" over her eyes, she will gibber stuff like, "Don't let it sweat you" or "It's no skin off my teeth." She even informed me on one sleepy morning that a doctor at the hospital has the biggest chip on his block she has ever seen.

It doesn't really matter, though, that she talks nonsense when she's tired because--with her being a neonatal intensive care nurse--even when she's wide awake, much of the time I don't understand what she's saying. I just nod politely and try not to let my eyes get too glazed over.

"Then this baby went into defib," she told me, "and the other started to brady at the same time. So I

suctioned, bagged, and called for the crash cart. . . .
Later, after a glycerine suppository, the poor thing just
went everywhere. I showed the diaper to Pam. Pam's the
one who cut off three toes with a lawn mower. I said,
'Look at the poo poo. Look at the poo poo.' And Pam
said, 'Cheryl, you're much too excited about this.'

* * *

The hospital where Cheryl works is about forty miles
from where we live. And since I don't know most of the
nurses she works with by name and face, she has to
contextualize her characters for me when she tells me
what goes on in the unit.

"I was telling Sherry--," she'll say to me.

"And Sherry is . . . ?" I'll ask.

"I stayed at her sister's house when I gave that
lecture at Mercy. . . . And then Emmy, she's the one
that when she throws up it comes out of her ears. . . ."

I just nod and try not to get glassy.

I think it's unfair that on the rare occasions when
I visit the unit, the nurses poke their heads into the
waiting room and start conversations with me without
first setting up a polite narrative context. Instead of
just "Annie Smith, RN," her nametag should read, "Annie--
jump-started Cheryl's car when I was nine-months
pregnant--Smith, RN."

* * *

Perhaps because of the nature of her profession, when it comes to basic body functions and human sexuality, Cheryl is both clinical and mature. On the other hand, I am not only squeamish, it seems, but profoundly ignorant as well. She chides me because I find it distressing that women have invaded the public airwaves with their private organic problems. Still, I can't seem to convince her that I'm hardly alone in my distress.

While I was driving my younger son, Mike, home from wrestling practice the other night, a velvet-voiced lady came on the radio: "I have discovered an herb," she cooed, "that helps ease menstrual cramps. In fact, my period surprised me last month."

Mike and I screamed in unison as we both dived for the radio dial. This woman was telling us a lot more about herself than we wanted to know.

My squeamishness goes back as far as I can remember. For my fourteenth birthday my parents planned a swim party. A few days before the big day, I was discussing the party plans with two girl friends when one asked very matter-of-factly of the other, "When do you start your period?"

"Hey," I broke in. "I don't need to know this."

My personal theory is that much of the squeamishness and ignorance I exhibit does not translate well across gender lines. Drawing from her experience as a woman and

a nurse, Cheryl agrees with my theory, adding that most of the ignorance she witnesses is handed down from father to son. She may be onto something here.

In the few moments I spent discussing the birds and the bees with my sons, I explained that women have some kind of inherent design flaw that manifests itself for a few days every month. I also proposed that they would stop doing it if they could, but they can't, so we just have to live with it.

Cheryl later informed the boys that what I told them was not true and that if I thought women had a design flaw, I should take it up with God. Then she looked at me with disgust when the boys asked if some women don't go swimming during "that time" for fear of bringing on a shark attack. She said that wasn't true either, that technology has improved to the point where most women can swim all the time. I told the boys later, out of earshot of Cheryl, that she was right, or course, and that modern shark repellents are, indeed, much better than they used to be.

When Cheryl mentioned the idea for this essay at the hospital, one nurse said, "My husband is just like that. We were camping one time, and I spotted two lizards mating on a log. Thinking it was a good opportunity to explain things to the kids, I called them over and said, 'Look at this, kids. They're making baby lizards. See,

that red thing there is his penis, and it's in her. . .
. ' That's as far as I got because my husband ran over to
us, waving his arms and screaming at me, 'What are you
telling them?'"

Like that father, I'm comfortable telling my kids
anything but the truth.

* * *

My ignorance, I tell Cheryl, although it might be
embarrassing, is still fundamentally harmless. Uttered
ignorance, however, often results in a lecture.

After years of graduate school and teaching, the
timer on my bladder is set to fifty minutes, the average
length of a class period. Cheryl can drive all day long,
it seems, and Mike says that he goes once in the morning,
and it's just a matter of discipline afterward. If I
happen to drink a big-gulp Coke, I may have to go every
twenty minutes or so for a while. I made the mistake of
whining to Cheryl on a car trip that Coke and coffee just
run straight through me.

"No, they don't," she said. "Peeing is like
paychecks; you're always one behind."

In answer to my stare of disbelief, Cheryl explained
that the same way your paycheck gets held back for one
pay period, the blood stream and the urinary tract hold
back liquids. She also informed me that the large
intestine doesn't collect all the solid food from the

stomach, nor does the small intestine collect all the liquids (the way I had once explained to my sons they did), and that a man couldn't extend his manliness by having a doctor make an incision around his you-know-what and then pull out his small intestine a bit farther.

Needless to say, I'm not permitted to help my sons with any homework that has to do with human anatomy. Cheryl doesn't think I'm anywhere near mature enough.

Suffer Little Children

We adults are like gods to our children. And, sad to say, they are too much as we are to God. The many disadvantages of our being gods, however, are far outweighed by the magnitude of our own shortcomings as children.

I have come to learn by observing my sons that children serve as a too-perfect image of our adult selves. Our "poor epitomies," as Shakespeare calls our children, so closely resemble us in situation and character that, if we were to trouble ourselves with an honest appraisal of our condition before God, it should only humble us for the effort.

The utter dependence of young children on an environment not of their shaping keenly illustrates our human inability to remedy our physical and emotional needs, native poverty being our only birthright. So to relieve this poverty, infants instinctively cry out. They cry out for food, for a change of clothes, for social comfort. Yet as adults, foolishly imagining that we have

outgrown our dependence, we embrace impoverishment rather than petition for our needs to be met, our pretend self-reliance inhibiting many opportunities for happiness.

* * *

And what of their character? No one has to teach a child to lie. Children come by it naturally, as naturally as they come by rebellion, ungratefulness, irresponsibility, a lack of wisdom--attributes magnified to infinity when compared with the far wider chasm between the greater God's older children and Himself.

Our god-skills being what they are, perhaps our children would be better if we were better gods. More likely, they would be better children if we would only be better children ourselves.

Does it surprise us, then, being the only available models of God, that our children blame us for their vices?

"If you had not asked me," my son said to me, "I would not have lied to you." He is not the first child to accuse a parent of his own misdeed.

"The woman whom Thou gavest to be with me," Adam protested to God, "she gave me from the tree, and I ate." Adam admits to being the second cousin to his sin after blaming God for giving him the woman and the woman for handing him the fruit. And, likewise, Eve, being a quick study, blames the serpent, whom she believes God has made

and allowed into the garden.

It should not surprise us that the first child of this disobedient couple murdered the second, death being the pre-announced consequence of the garden mutineers' insolence against their parent.

* * *

Parenting also gives us practice being God, the process of parenting and godding being remarkably similar. Parenting is God's way of saying to us, "If you think being Me is so easy, then you try it for a while."

So we re-create ourselves in our own image. We provide. We nurture. We instruct. We command. We judge. We sacrifice ourselves to redeem our children from their hell-bent self-destruction. We forgive. We forgive. We forgive. And too often, with heart in hand, we allow our young prodigals to learn for themselves the treacherous lie that experience is the best teacher--that they must touch evil in order to embrace good more intelligently.

"Look around you," I tell my sons. "People make mistakes every day, mistakes that you don't need to repeat. Experience is the best teacher--other people's experience."

"Do not believe those rigid threats of death," the Serpent said to Eve; "ye shall not die." How should you die? By the fruit? It is knowledge. "By the

Threat'ner?" Satan asked. "Look on mee, Mee who have touched and tasted."

The problem with touching evil, I've learned, is that evil touches back, only harder. But the touch of evil bruises, and the taste of evil is always bitter. So, if it's all the same, I tell my sons, I prefer to embrace goodness ignorantly.

That being true, there can be no fortunate fall from Grace. Some would argue that if we had not sinned we would not know God's mercy. But should we sin that Grace might abound? God forbid, Paul says. By itself, the knowledge of good makes us complete. In stinging contrast, the knowledge of evil deflowers us. It rapes us of our innocence. Who would choose for a child lust, jealousy, and pride over peace, charity, and love? I would eagerly resign the captaincy of my soul in exchange for a fistful of undying flowers and a hammock lazily slung in that old garden.

On a brighter note, my children's uncoerced obedience pleases me. How is my delight in their obedience different from God's delight in mine? Jesus said the act of obedience is the sign of love. If you love me, He said, keep my commandments. It is not enough, it seems, to say that we love. How different our lives might be if our first parents had, in the beginning, shown evidence of their love.

Even as I bask in the evidence of my children's love, I also delight in my ability as a lesser god to provide the resources for their happiness and enrichment. If they ask me for a fish, will I give them a snake instead? However, being even a modestly wise god, I must refuse on principle to collaborate in my children's demise, which means not giving them the snakes they often ask for.

I never feel more joy than when I meet another's need or when I supply a material delight for a loved one. And how will the greater God, with infinite resources and capacity for joy, be even wiser and more generous in giving me everything that is good for me? Strange, though, when I'm the one doing the asking, how the fish and snakes can look so much alike.

* * *

"Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me, for of such is the kingdom of heaven." The hierarchy of human order we adults have established to our advantage is shattered with these words, the paradox being that Jesus values something inherent in little children that we either lose or reject as we mature.

What is it, then, that Jesus values in his youthful creatures, that he prefers them over the older ones? I heard a pastor say it is their simple faith, a faith that, in spite of the circumstances, trusts in the good

will and ability of adults to make every bad thing better. They believe we can soothe hurt feelings and mend broken toys and splintered hearts as handily as we stretch a band-aid over a scratched knee.

Moreover, children imagine us to be the faithful stewards of all the good things, whether those good things be as personal as a family heirloom or as common as clean water, so those things that are private and common are preserved as a legacy in a perpetual trust.

But we lesser gods have demonstrated repeatedly that we are not up to our task. Being merely the preludes to the greater God--God's hazy shadow on the earth--we must confess to our children that, though we may be the lords of our homes, we are not the gods of the universe. Our ignorance of things universal can be exceeded only by our dazzling hypocrisy, should we exaggerate our importance.

But what may be most important of all is the concession we must make to our children that it is they who by their example lead us out of the broad pathless wasteland back to the narrow road of faith.

Murdering Abel

"Eyes front," my father ordered my sister and me as he slowed the car. "Just keep looking straight ahead," he warned us again, both of us sitting with him in the front seat as he pulled the car to the shoulder of the mountain road. Being young and unable to contain our curiosity, in spite of the implied consequences of Dad's threat, we peeked at every opportunity, the mystery of what he was hiding on this isolated stretch of Hawaiian road being an irresistible attraction to us.

When Dad lifted out the back seat we saw that underneath he had hidden gun parts--government model Colt .45 barrels, slides, receivers, and main springs. I recognized the parts because at the age of ten I could field strip and reassemble a .45 within the one-minute time standard for boot Marines. By age twelve I could do it blindfolded, just in case it jammed on me in the dark.

As my sister and I looked out over the Pacific horizon, in the intervals between passing cars, we saw from the corners of our eyes a variety of pistol parts and

cleaning equipment sailing into the tops of the trees on the downhill side of the mountain slope. We learned years later, after the Marine Corps transferred Dad back to the States, that he had been under investigation for pilfering weapons and that he suspected our home was about to be searched by federal authorities.

I completely understand my father's attraction to .45's, his personal .45 being his only possession I have resolutely staked claim to when he dies. A loaded .45 compensates immediately for any real or imagined feelings of inadequacy or inequality. It is simply impossible to hold one and not feel improved.

A .45 doesn't merely crack or pop when it fires, like its lesser siblings; it roars, instead, with a profoundly satisfying authority. The power of the stocky, muscular bullets exceeds hyperbole. Wad cutters, belly busters, and dum-dums: menacing-looking bullets in any caliber, but extraordinarily so in one shaped like a small fire hydrant. As a child, whenever I held a .45 bullet, I would press it to my body, imagining the damage it could do to the human frame.

"A gook came running at me across a rice paddy," my next-door neighbor, a Marine Corps Sergeant Major, once said to me. "I hit him in the knee with a .45 slug. He just flipped over in the air. The bullet will knock you down if it just hits your little finger," the zealous

neighbor offered, reaffirming one of the pistol's mythical abilities.

A few years ago I travelled as an escort officer on a military flight carrying civilian V.I.P's on a familiarization tour of several Air Force installations around the country. While we were in San Antonio, I made a brief side trip to a nearby gunsmith to pick up a shotgun my boss had sent out for repairs. When I re-boarded the plane, I discretely placed the shotgun, secured in a padded gun case, inside the crew compartment.

"Was that a gun?" a rather delicate woman nervously asked me when I sat down in the seat next to her.

"Nah," I said, pulling a .45 from my briefcase.
"This is a gun."

* * *

Big pistols radiate a potent sexual aura. During the Gulf War when I flashed the .45 I was issued as a personal defense weapon to my brother aides-de-camp, they had to have pistols also. But instead of .45's, they were issued standard military and police Baretta 9mm's, twice as many rounds to fire as a .45 but with far less staggering machismo when playing mine-is-bigger-than-yours.

* * *

As much as I enjoy firing guns and am just comfortable having them around me, I can readily discrim-

inate in a socially responsible way between the casual fun of a weapon as a plaything and a weapon as a tool for self-protection, police work, or professional soldiering. This has not always been the case.

I rarely tell anyone anymore of the time that I shot my sister's boyfriend with a shotgun. I was 14. Norm was 17. Norm and I usually got along reasonably well, but on this day we were at each other's throats. He teased me incessantly, and I fought back. Finally, early in the evening, after my parents left for a party, I walked over to the gun cabinet, pulled out a shotgun, and loaded it with two shells. Everyone's eyes turned toward me when I came into the kitchen carrying the hefty double-barrel.

The first shot hit Norm squarely in the chest, pounding him against the kitchen wall. The second shot, being wholly unnecessary, only added insult to the first.

Of course, Norm and I had been planning this stunt for several days. The day before we had removed the lead shot and powder from the shells, leaving only the primers. Fired primers, in a confined area like a kitchen, make enough noise to sound like the real thing. My sister was not nearly as amused as we were.

* * *

My father and my father-in-law, both career Marines and Vietnam veterans, chose far different paths after

their retirements. My father collected an arsenal worthy of the most militant private militia, while, in contrast, my father-in-law will not permit weapons in his house.

"Guns hurt people" is the only explanation he offers.

One evening, with a group of family and friends sitting around the kitchen table at my in-law's house, a man in the group confided something that none of us ever suspected.

"I killed an old woman," he said, an announcement wholly out of context with the general light-heartedness of the conversation. A man always in control, he seemed uneasy about airing his long-kept secret. His discomfort showed in his eyes.

"I shot her in the back," he spilled out, his eyes searching from face to face, knowing this second detail would be even more difficult for us to imagine and accept.

"We were in a hostile village, questioning people about who was laying mines on the road. An old woman we suspected had been setting booby traps started getting restless. We had known for a while she was a VC and began to suspect from her nervousness that she had led us into an ambush. When the shooting started, I told her to stop, but she wouldn't. I shot her in the back as she ran up the trail."

No one knew what to say. I think we all understand that our fathers and brothers and uncles and cousins did things in combat that may have seemed justifiable and necessary at the time, but in retrospect may now seem indefensible even to themselves.

"I'm sure you did exactly what you had to do," the man's wife finally said, mercifully breaking the tense silence, finding the only words that would pacify the wraith after nearly twenty-five years of haunting.

* * *

My personal fascination with things that go "boom" began early. As it is with many kids, I imagine, fire-crackers were my introduction to explosives. But the early fascination with childish first-things waned as the low-explosive thrills quickly became common. At fireworks displays, for example, I have lost all interest in the glittering reds, blues, and oranges--the colors we spontaneously applaud with our "ooh's" and "aah's"--but I continue to admire the pounding high-explosive canisters, the ones that thump my chest all the way to my spine.

My father kept large quantities of black powder around the house for the muzzleloaders we owned, which, when I graduated from legal fireworks to lethal high explosives, gave me ready access to the most important ingredient for homemade bombs. For the bomb cases we used brass bud-vases with the necks hammered shut, an old

smoke grenade, and even the propellant bulb from a beer keg. What we lacked were safe fuses, making the detonation of the bombs awkward. Candle wicks burned too slowly, and, considering the small but deadly size of our bombs, firecracker fuses burned way too fast, fixing the danger level of our experiments well outside our courage parameters.

One time, using a candle wick for a fuse, we had a fifteen-minute hang fire with a pipe cannon we had loaded with a croquet ball. A hang fire is a delay in an explosion after the firing or explosion should have occurred. This is usually the result of a faulty or slow-burning wick. After waiting at a safe distance from the cannon for five full minutes, not willing to go near enough to see for certain that the wick had gone out, we left for my house, planning to come back later in the afternoon.

We learned afterward that, about ten minutes after we left, my friend's mother came home from grocery shopping in town only to think her world had dropped off its hinges when the cannon fired out in the yard.

"You boys shook every window in the house," she scolded us.

We finally settled on firecracker fuses for most of our bombs and cannons, trusting our legs to carry us to safety.

Shooting a muzzleloader is not much different from

firing a cannon, especially if you approach the loading and firing of one as unscientifically as we did. My dad bought me a .50 caliber smooth-bore muzzleloader for my thirteenth birthday. Bringing some friends with us, we took it out to the city sandpit that same afternoon to see if it would shoot.

Since we were new at this, my father loaded it the first time with what seemed to him a reasonably conservative charge. I figured that since he had loaded it, then he would shoot it, but, instead, he handed the gun to me.

"It's your gun," he said in answer to the anxious look in my eyes. "You shoot it."

Maybe the element of real danger is what is so appealing about weapons or explosives, because in tame, controlled ways many of us enjoy imagining that we are flirting with disaster. For the same reasons we ride roller coasters or young children have us chase them around the house pretending we are monsters, we feel larger, enhanced sensations when we are afraid. We scare ourselves silly and then line up for more.

I pulled the stock of the muzzleloader back into my shoulder, closed my eyes, and squeezed the trigger.

Whoosh.

The round lead ball barely cleared the end of the barrel before dropping to the ground at my feet.

"I'll fix that," Dad said, loading the gun with what he thought to be a more adequate charge. Then he added a little extra powder just to be sure the bullet didn't get stuck in the barrel.

When I pulled the trigger, the recoil drove the steel butt plate of the gun down rather than back into my shoulder. The steel barrel hit me between the eyes like a pitched brick, sending me reeling backward until I tripped over my own feet and fell to the ground.

So there I sat, knocked senseless from the gun hitting me in the face and baffled as to why everyone was laughing at me and pointing at my head. Finally, someone picked me up off the ground and walked me over to the side-view mirror of a pickup truck. I had a broad diagonal welt running across my forehead and down between my eyes. With a little prompting, I understood what everyone thought was so hysterical. My head was on fire. Threads of white smoke spiraled upward from dozens of tiny fires in my hair. The overcharge of black powder had recoiled the hammer, allowing a backward blast of burning powder to discharge out of the firing mechanism.

* * *

I suspect that the line I walked as a boy between my juvenile fascination with explosives and becoming a menace to the public was quite thin in places. The irony becomes more intriguing when considering what some might

think the moral ambiguity of my primary occupation in the military as a nuclear-weapons launch officer. But even the rational misgivings I may have had at one time about the job I agreed to do I resolved a long time ago. The only regret I have is that I may have done my part too well.

Before the breakup of the Soviet Union, with the world's nuclear arsenal armed and aimed and the clock counting the last seconds before nuclear midnight, in the business we joked about "crowd pleasers"--clusters of weapons exploding over a target. As with any institution that deals in or deals out destruction and death, our bank of morbid humor kept us emotionally distanced from the horror of the job we knew we would do if the time came. We had t-shirts printed with captions such as "Mess with us. Turn to dust"; or my personal favorite, "Thirty minutes guaranteed delivery or the second one's free." But we were not in the least insensitive to the destruction we would cause were we to do our duty, knowing full well that when it came time to do what we were trained to do it would more than likely be our last conscious act. There would certainly be no going home to our families after work.

I once gave a presentation to a group in a rural area of Montana where many of our missiles are siloed. One rancher on whose property several launchers are set

asked me what launch blast from the missiles would do to his cattle. Clearly he did not understand that launch blast would be the least of his cattle's problems.

"The day I do my job, you won't do yours," we joked with people who asked about our work. "The day I do my job," I wanted to tell the rancher, "don't be worrying about your cattle."

On a military visit to Moscow shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a young Soviet officer accused me of, among other things, being KGB because I would not drink with him.

"Relax," he said. "The Cold War is over."

"And who won?" I countered.

"You did," he said, still shoving a drink at me.

"Are you happy now?"

At the time, I was happy. But now that I've thought it over, I liked the world better the way it was.

The old-world stand off between the East and West seems so blissfully predictable now compared to the new-world mayhem, where peace rains down like hammers instead of like dividends. The new world dis-order has shattered the relative stability of the old familial arrangement by setting free ten thousand well-armed and unruly children.

Tragically for all of the world's people, just as history has demonstrated that no society ever gives up a technological advantage in weaponry, the nuclear genie

will never willingly or unwillingly go back into its bottle. And, therefore, unless we can corporately generate a profound change in the fundamental nature of humankind, which seems highly unlikely, this genie or one even more sinister will one day turn on its master.

And even if we can successfully regulate ourselves at the corporate level, it seems less likely than ever that we will rid ourselves of mad bombers, evidenced most recently by the hideous carnage at the federal building in Oklahoma City. For what insane reasons did this American boy cross the thin line from firing croquet balls out of homemade cannons to vaporizing his neighbors?

Moreover, the subway gassing in Japan, random assassinations in Algeria, tribal cannibalism in Rwanda and Somalia, and merry revenge in Bosnia bear ample witness that heinous spleen is a human problem and not exclusively an American nightmare. Recently a reporter asked a Serb soldier why he continued to slaughter Moslems long after an assured military victory.

"I've been waiting six-hundred years for this," he replied with a smile, intimating that vengeance against the Moslem majority was his right by destiny.

The soldier's candid response makes me think that it was not out of envy at all that Cain killed Abel. Cain took great pleasure in murdering his brother.

Barefoot in My Boots

Cheryl, my wife, underdresses. She never dresses shabbily or wears jeans and a t-shirt on occasions when something like a skirt and blouse would be more appropriate. I mean that she hardly ever dresses warmly enough for what we are doing.

Having grown up in Maine, I learned at a fairly young age that it's always better to bring a coat or a sweater along and not need it than it is to need it and not have it. Cheryl, on the other hand, having spent most of her life running around sandalfooted in the deep South, where even on the coolest days it warms up by the middle of the afternoon, says she prefers to go without rather than lug anything around unnecessarily.

During the previews at the last movie we went to see, judging by the wet chill in the theater and the draft along the cement floor, I knew that it would not be long before I would be handing over my coat.

"It's cold out," I warned her before we left the house.

"Drop me off at the door, and I'll run in," she said, putting her lipstick in my pocket so she wouldn't have to carry a purse.

I would like to believe that she thinks I have big shoulders--big shoulders in the sense that I could carry her along if our road gets rough and in times of discomfort find a way to shelter her. But, in a much less noble than practical sense, she doesn't think of me as having big shoulders as much as having big pockets.

By the first chase scene in the movie, Cheryl sat bundled comfortably in my coat and my wool socks while I shivered barefoot in my boots.

* * *

A woman friend recently asked me to share with her husband my formula for a happy marriage. I told her the most important lesson I have learned is that women can ask questions that have really wrong answers.

"Does this dress make me look fat?" has the most potential for disaster, "No fatter than anything else you wear," definitely being the wrong way to respond.

Cheryl tested me several times recently. I passed with honors twice and, in spite of being an old veteran, failed the third exam miserably.

We were planning a reception at our house for our first-born son, who graduated from high school this year. As Cheryl showed me the menu and price list of the food

she was ordering from the caterer, she asked me after each item, "Is this too expensive?" I never answered her. I just kept focusing my eyes intently on the menu, running my finger down the list.

It was all too expensive, of course, but how do I fix a price on her love for our son? Battles like this one are winnable, I have come to learn, but are never worth the price of victory.

The big test came recently when her fourteen-year-old Siamese cat needed to go to the vet for a "Golden-Years" check-up.

"Tai has a cardiac arrhythmia," Cheryl, a nurse, said to me over the phone from the vet's office.

"Something to do with her heart, right?" I asked, once again demonstrating my firm grasp of the medically obvious. But I knew from past failures to choose my words carefully when discussing her cat.

"Her heart is enlarged," she said, "and her heartbeat is irregular."

"That's not good," I said, sounding concerned, picking up my emotional cues from the distressed tone in her voice.

"The doctor wants to do some tests," she continued.

"Aha, what are these tests going to cost?" I wanted to ask. And, "Did you ask the doctor if he has kids in college or a boat payment due? It's a cat, for Pete's

sake, not one of our kids."

Instead, as I carefully considered what I would say next, Cheryl filled in the pregnant pause with the bomb-shell.

"How much can I spend?"

"Whatever you need to," I told her without hesitating, knowing that there was only one right answer to this question and a dozen very wrong ones.

Not all of my responses are so well considered. The week before, while we were out on a walk, Cheryl mentioned to me that her father's dog, Oly, was getting up there in years and that he had asked her mother to take Oly to the vet when the time came to have him put to sleep.

"Will you take Tai to the vet for me?" she asked sweetly.

"What time do they close?" I said, looking at my watch. "I have a softball game at six."

Sometimes I just can't pass up the stinging quip, regardless of how insensitive it might be. "It was only a joke," I have yet to learn, does not carry much weight when the jest involves her children or her cat.

She Reads My Mind

Long marriages, it seems, are becoming increasingly rare. Long and happy marriages would be extinct, a single friend told me, if it weren't for Cheryl and me. She talked about us as if we were the last of the dinosaurs. The same friend told me one day that she had given up all hope that she could have a long and happy alliance because she had never encountered one. She said my relationship with Cheryl had restored her hope. But her compliment made me feel both fortunate and burdened at the same time.

Cheryl and I have been married nineteen years this anniversary. Although nineteen years doesn't seem like a long time to us, we are both sensing an ever-increasing gap between us and most of our acquaintances who have never married, are newly married, newly divorced, or newly remarried. When new acquaintances find out that we are not yet forty and approaching our twentieth wedding anniversary, they often look at us as if we are social oddities, giving us that last-of-the-dinosaurs gaze.

They consider us either stupid for marrying so young and not "playing the field" before settling down or just odd because, in spite of not having played the field, we seem so content with each other. I think they mistake our obvious comfort for ignorant resignation, when, in fact, after seeing what's available out there, even if it's after the fact, we find ourselves reassured to have discovered each other among the many wrong possibilities.

Two years behind me in school, Cheryl was eighteen when I married her, my high school sweetheart. I was an older nineteen and already two years out of school, having spent most of that time, except for a handful of long weekends, away from home in the military. Because we had been apart so much during those last two years, we were practically strangers by our wedding day.

We have a difficult time convincing our sons, who look to us as role models, that we did everything the wrong way.

"It worked for you," our seventeen-year-old son said to us when we commented that he and his girlfriend were getting too chummy.

"Yeah," Cheryl told him, "but nobody with any sense at all was betting on us."

I'm asked with increasing frequency what it takes to make a marriage happy. Although I pretend to know something about it, in fact, if I were to tell the truth, I

would have to say that I am just extraordinarily fortunate. I am the rich man who inherited his fortune from a distant, unknown uncle. I admit that I have become fairly competent at preserving my fortune, but I had nothing whatsoever to do with generating even a penny of it.

I wish that whatever it is I have with Cheryl I could put it in a bottle. I wish there could be a simple formula for happiness or a checklist to follow as popular magazines suggest: "Ten Easy Steps to a Better Relationship" or "How to Put the Romance Back into Your Marriage."

Perhaps I have stumbled upon a clue. We bought a refrigerator a few years back that has ice water and ice cubes in the door. After about six weeks, Mike, our younger son, complained that sometimes the ice maker gave him crushed ice and sometimes it gave him ice cubes, but he preferred the ice cubes.

Imagine his astonishment when I walked him over to the refrigerator and showed him the buttons labeled "CRUSHED" and "CUBES," revealing that he had a choice in the matter, that getting crushed ice or cubed ice from the refrigerator was not a random act.

I think that is the way it is with relationships sometimes. I want to believe that we can corral some of the inherent randomness in relationships if we learn

where the buttons are, if we study the machinery, not in a shallow physical sense, but through a conscious act of bonding with another person.

Even though we don't have a formula, Cheryl and I have worked out an agreement. Many years ago, we decided that I would treat her as well as I do my boss (at the time I was the officer aide-de-camp to a senior general in the Air Force), and she would treat me as well as she does her cat. This simple arrangement supplies each of us with all of the ammunition either one ever needs for getting attended to like royalty.

Among many other things, I love to have my head scratched. Now, since the agreement, all I have to do is plop down on the couch next to her, drop my head in her lap, and demand my due. Likewise, when I balk at pampering her, the magic words "If the General wanted a plane to Washington . . ." gets Cheryl pretty much whatever she wants when she wants it.

But even good relationships like ours are infinitely complicated by the variables that life constantly drops across our path. So, couples not only re-invent the wheel with every marriage, but do so repeatedly throughout the relationship. Who is the same person at thirty or forty that he or she was at eighteen? When I mentioned to Cheryl the other day that I'm not the same person I was at eighteen, "Thank God for that" was all

she said. I suggest, therefore, that if a relationship is to prosper, it must be the constants that make it successful.

Although I feel supremely unqualified to say what makes me happy, much less what makes anyone else happy, I can list what Cheryl and I never argue about. I had always suspected that if someone were to ask us to name the five most important things in our lives, our lists would be quite similar. In fact, I tested my theory, and our lists are identical, including the order.

The most important thing in both of our lives is our relationship with God. Perhaps it's a bit old-fashioned, but a well-considered, shared, and sincere faith has provided a solid foundation for both of us in an otherwise perplexing world. Second is our relationship with each other, followed by our relationship with our sons. We know that our boys will grow up and move away. We both want their departure to be a reaffirmation of our relationship with each other rather than an unpleasant surprise that we have nothing in common except them. Fourth comes our relationship with our own parents and family. And finally, relationships with our friends. Other things may be important to us in their proper place and time, but relationships are the common element in everything that really matters to both of us.

It would be hypocritical to suggest that money and

career are not important to us because we both have good careers and more than our fair share of material wealth. These things did not happen by accident. We recognize, though, that, like cake to frosting, careers and material wealth are merely vehicles that allow us to transport conveniently what tastes sweetest to us.

It was not too long ago that Cheryl and I were using hard-side suitcases for kitchen chairs and cardboard boxes for bedroom dressers and that I had to have a garage sale to raise twenty-five dollars to pay a medical bill. But since we have begun accumulating things, these things have complicated our lives more than contributed to our peace of mind. They certainly have not increased our happiness. Our possessions own us, that old bachelor Thoreau said, robbing us of time to attend to more important matters.

The real test of my convictions would come, I suppose, if my things were taken from me. Would my contact with these possessions taint my contentment with relationships were I to go back to eating my dinner while seated on a suitcase and getting my clothes from a cardboard-box dresser.

* * *

We could speculate from the staggering divorce rate that the disposable marriage is the relationship of choice. It seems as if marriage has become going steady

by contract and little else. When we become unhappy or bored with our situation, we seek change, whether that change results in another partner or simply being left to ourselves. But in spite of what seems to be a society where we would rather not fully commit to each other, I find that I am envied for being in a long relationship, and marvelled at for being in a long and happy marriage.

I have also discovered that my relationship with Cheryl has created a disturbing paradox. For, though I have never been especially appealing to women before, now that it is publicly apparent that I'm committed to making one woman's life a happy one, other women look at me as if I were a rare jewel, a jewel that can possibly be stolen away. But the illusion would be shattered for them were I to become tarnished.

Besides, at age eighteen, Cheryl set down the law a few months before the wedding. First, she said, she doesn't believe in divorce under any circumstances. She expressed confidence that we could work through any problems we have. We will accomplish this feat, she proposed, by agreeing never to go to bed at night angry with each other.

Second, if I cheat on her, she'll divorce me on the spot. "You get one warning," she informed me before we married. "This is it."

The stunning clarity of her ultimatum seemed so

obvious to her as an eighteen-year-old bride--that she would take the kids, the car, the house, and the money, leaving me to live in poverty with whatever loose woman would take a man from his family.

"What would she get?" Cheryl asks in disgust. "A man who cheats on his wife."

She periodically reminds me that, although she doesn't believe in divorce or going to sleep angry, I'm still on probation. Besides, she reads my mind. And since she can read my mind, I can't kid myself that I could ever get away with anything extracurricular.

Her ability to read my mind doesn't often spook me immediately when she does it because it isn't until after the fact that I realize I had not asked the question she just answered as if I had asked one. It's more than her anticipating or contextualizing where the conversation is headed. Often, we haven't spoken for hours when she'll pipe into the middle of one of my private thoughts, as if she had been listening in the whole time. Perhaps her ability to hear my thoughts is a manifestation in the Biblical sense of two becoming one.

* * *

The suggestion that two shall become one flesh has always seemed too metaphysical for a literal person like me. I understand how in the purely sexual sense two can become one or even, through reproduction, in the biolo-

gical sense. But Cheryl and I have a connection that transcends my skepticism of mystical bonding. Maybe our connection isn't mystical at all but an enhanced manifestation of a purely natural phenomenon. Or perhaps our connection is evidence of a supernatural ability that has either degenerated to the point where we see only glimpses of its presence within ourselves, or it is a preview of coming attractions, a look ahead to how a noncorporeal being communicates. Between us, then, it is, in our limited capacity, our spirits and not our bodies speaking to each other.

Nearly an hour after we had gone to bed one night, I was still planning out the next day's business activities in my head.

"Think slower," she complained to me, "or at least a little quieter. I can't sleep."

Another night she grumbled that numbers were racing through her mind, as if I were doing the bills in my head, which was exactly what I was doing.

And while walking together across a parking lot one day, she gasped in horror, "What did you say?"

"Nothing," I said. "I didn't say anything."

"Yes, you did. You swore or something, but I didn't hear what word it was."

"I was thinking about telling you what someone wrote on a paper at school," I confessed to her. "But I didn't

know whether to say the word or not."

Without putting the word in print myself, I'll say that it is a gynecological reference that she had never heard from me before.

Needless to say, whenever we play games that involve questions and answers, if I am asking the question, I never look at the answer if I don't know it. If I do know the answer, I try to think of anything else, in the mean time waving my hands in front of my face to disrupt whatever currents are carrying my thoughts to her head. But not thinking about game answers is like not thinking about elephants. Cheryl laughs when she eventually picks the answer from my brain.

For years, when deciding who would do an unpleasant chore, we would pick a number, either one or two--like a one-shot version of rock, paper, scissors.

"We need paper towels," she might say.

I respond with, "Pick a number," as I put either one finger or two behind my back.

Although many times I was sorely tempted to lie about which number I had behind me, I resisted, and would go to the store for paper towels.

She never misses when I pick a number and she chooses. Never. No exaggeration. Eventually I started putting both hands behind my back--left hand one finger and right hand two, or vice versa--then thinking left or

right rather than one or two. By adding that variable, I worked the odds back to fifty-fifty.

But not only does she read my thoughts; she also generates them. She calls it sending me signals. Distance is no obstacle. She complains, for example, if I don't bring her home something she thought about real hard. This isn't that difficult for her because it usually involves fast food. I'll be driving along and know she wants a burrito.

"I wasn't even on that side of town," I tell her when I walk in the door.

Now that we are more conspicuous consumers, she makes the signal infinitely clearer by calling me on the car phone.

It is interesting how the bond we share affects me when I am away from her. Since it seems that it is rarely convenient for us to travel at the same time, we often take trips without each other, usually on business or to visit our own families. Over the years we have settled on two weeks apart being the balance point between missing each other and getting our money's worth from the plane tickets.

I think it was in the summer of 1991 that I served as a military escort officer to a large group of civilians visiting Air Force installations around the country. We spent a few days in San Antonio, Texas,

where we toured during the day, wining and dining in the evening. One evening, after a superb Mexican dinner, we listened to a local band play out on the second-floor patio overlooking downtown. The evening ambiance could not have been more dazzling. The warm breeze embraced me as I looked down on the busy street. The moon drifted large, yellow, and full above the buildings and the distant Texas skyline. Nevertheless, in the midst of plenty, all I could think about was how my glass was half full. But I don't feel empty without Cheryl as much as I feel incomplete.

* * *

Cheryl and I are not old yet, but I sense that we are beginning the process. There is nothing we can do about it, either, except gracefully submit. Each owing God a death, we commit ourselves to His care for the last great adventure.

My life has been such that, should I die today, I am entirely satisfied that I have had more than my fair share of joy. I have no complaints. If I had my choice, however, I would not grow old. I would not grow old gracefully, not grow old at all, in fact. I hear about aging gracefully, but have yet to discover what is so graceful about it. Conversely, aging seems entirely unnatural--the dis-graceful consequence, I have been told, of the orchard thieves' ancient disobedience. But I must

resist what tempts me. How could I desert Cheryl when she needs me the most? As I have spent my life trying to make one woman happy and, in return, being made happy, I see no reason why, if God permits, we cannot stage an exit as graceful as the performance itself.

Imagining Kate Oardin

For years, on my way to class, I have walked past a small metal sign bolted to one of the concrete pillars of the Humanities building at the University of Kansas. In red block letters on a white background the sign reads "Kate Oardin." I have long wondered about Kate, who she was and what she did to get her name on a sign that commemorates her life. Did she die at the base of this column after a fierce struggle for her life? Was she a promising activist, a budding humanitarian too soon removed from this world in a senseless car accident? Whatever she did, whoever she was, it and she must have been monumental. No one else has such a sign anywhere on campus. I have looked.

"Why doesn't someone take better care of this sign?" I always ask myself as I hurriedly walk past. The bolts are rusty, the white paint scratched. Who put it here in the first place? I have long imagined that many years ago Kate's sorority sisters, by stealth or by permission, erected this memorial to honor Kate as a fallen heroine.

Where are these well-intentioned sorority sisters now? I can only think that they eventually forgot her, the significance of her life and her heroism, and then grew weary of maintaining the memorial.

One day, a little less in a hurry than usual, I stopped to look around the area below the sign, to pay tribute for a while to Kate and her life. And though I had but a foggy image of Kate in my mind and knew entirely nothing of her heroic achievements, I offered up to Heaven an agonized prayer as I composed in my mind both her face and her deeds.

How fickle we are, I thought, to erect such a memorial and then to neglect it as the memory fades and the little efforts to remember become tedious. The sign needs new bolts--galvanized bolts that won't rust, this time. It needs fresh white paint to cover the scratches in the background and red paint to fill in the chipping around the edges of her name. Perhaps even a new sign altogether.

As I stood there looking closely at the sign for the first time, I thought about Kate and the years that I have kept her alive in my mind. Kate Oardin. No, not Kate Oardin, but KATE OARDIN. All capital letters. How fitting, I thought. Like a tombstone or the raised bronze engraving on the base plate of a statue. My ire peaked again as I fretted over the decayed condition of

my university's memorial to this brave girl's life. I reached up to brush away some of the piled-up rust specks and to flatten out or tear away the raised red paint peeling around the edges of her name. "My God!" I thought as looked more closely. "Her name is painted over something else! The sign is second-hand!"

No, I soon discovered, the sign isn't second-hand at all. Some devious vandal had scratched away letters--NOSBG--from around my sweet Kate's name.

NO

S B G

Boat Wench

"If all the year were playing holidays,
To sport would be as tedious as to work."
(I Henry IV)

Samuel Johnson wrote about an unsinkable acquaintance of his who always looked forward to spring. "If his health was impaired," he said, "the spring would restore it; if what he wanted was at a high price, it would fall its value in the spring." Johnson reports that his friend anticipated the blessings of spring well into early summer, and then, if the blessings were more meager than expected, would declare that all would be well again come the next spring. The happy friend lived in blissful and constant anticipation of better circumstances.

I anticipate spring also. But in contrast with Johnson's friend, I don't look for it on the calendar; I search for spring in the newspaper classifieds.

After reading the sports page, Cheryl, being a nurse, often peruses the classifieds for medical employment opportunities--not that she is dissatisfied

with her present job, but just to keep up with what is going on in the professional market. I, on the other hand, find myself searching the ads for an incompatible mixture of country homes and Harley-Davidsons.

* * *

Once, while looking through the section labeled "Boats for Sale," I found this intriguing offer:

Boat wench, \$15.

"I suppose that being a wench means she must be young," I said to myself. "And she had better be handy in the galley," I quipped to a friend when I showed him the ad.

Although I think it certain that the advertiser must have meant "boat winch," still I have a mental photo album stuffed full of fascinating images from fantasizing about the possibilities of owning my own boat wench. One picture is of an unrefined peasant girl, frolicking through her chores on deck and in the cabin below, only too happy to please me for her keep. Another image is of a sultry blonde--I have to keep a close eye on her or she will steal away with a younger, more romantic, and more dashing boat captain.

But until she jumps ship and breaks my heart, we sail the high seas, she and I, eating fish we catch at

sea and drinking fresh water we collect in gourds and drums from cool streams on isolated, unpopulated islands.

But if the old adage "You get what you pay for" has any truth to it, I suspect that you can't buy much of a wench these days for \$15.00.

Who says you can't find romance in the classifieds? I don't actually know anyone who does, but if I'm to continue harboring my odd notions, I suppose I should first buy a boat. And someday I will. Someday.

* * *

Perhaps because I have successfully lived a nomad's life all of my life, my yearning at this time is for deeper roots than the shallow ones I've spread about so thinly while wandering across the continent. I search for a place to sink these roots, to nest, let's say, where I look for spring, among the columns in the classified section under "Lots and Acreage."

45 acres. 1000 feet of lake shoreline.
Sandy beach. 1/2 mile
from asphalt road. Easy access
to town. Owner will finance.

I imagine a room to write in, a trail to walk, a place where future grandchildren will beg our sons to send them. My life will be complete, unfettered, and richly abundant. Spring is indeed coming, I promise myself. When I mentioned to a close friend that I am ready to sink roots, he observed that, along with the deep and

grounding roots, I would still need to send out runners.

My friend understands that tangled among my nesting urges lie other ambitions--ambitions seemingly incompatible with my desire for a quiet home life. I want to ride around the world on a motorcycle. I imagine that I will cross the oceans on foreign cargo ships, teaching English to the crew to earn my keep.

But what if I die in Siberia? or run out of gas in Nepal? "Die young and in an heroic effort," an older man once told me--the same gentleman who posits that "every man should speak German and every woman should speak French." He said also, "There is nothing more exciting in life than being shot at and missed." Is it wise to take advice from this man? I think so.

This vacillation between my natures often astounds me. The amiable spring breezes wafting pleasantly about my home compete daily with the equally appealing tortures and torments of biting winter winds. Perhaps this explains my dreamy imaginings of domesticity aboard a sailing ship and of the peril of a torrid romance aboard a floating home. Perhaps it explains why I stand out in the field behind my house during violent weather, savoring the dangerous attention of the storm and yet remaining within sight of refuge.

So, with one room of my two-room soul full of romance and the other full of rats, it seems that I can

tolerate only so much domestic delight before I begin slinging table scraps to my friends across the hall. My sons often understand and even indulge the rat feedings while my wife finds them incomprehensible and distressing. But I've been feeding those rats for so long that I know them all by name, and, to my wife's horror, they come to me when I call them.

* * *

I grew up with the credo "If you're not scared, you're not having fun." As teenagers, my brother and I added to our primitive theory, "And if you're not bleeding, you're not trying hard enough." As I grow older, however, I find, more often than not, that I come home on my shield rather than carrying it. But my compelling need to experience only increases with an irresistible impulse to settle down. And pain, as it always has, remains an elegant pleasure.

Cheryl attributes my mixed bag of feelings to mid-life crisis, forgetting that I haven't changed to any appreciable degree since she first met me when we were both teenagers. I jokingly tell her that growing a beard, getting a tattoo, and buying a Harley isn't mid-life crisis at all--the urge for these things being perfectly compatible with my desire for a quiet country life.

Perhaps, in a way, she is right, and these powerful

cravings evidence a strange pregnancy within me--not a child growing in size and strength, aching to be born, but a restrained child, once again loosening his bonds.

* * *

On a particularly grizzly fall day the rats stepped across the hall, leading me by the hand once again to the mountains in northern New Hampshire. Several hours before darkness settled on the mountain, my brother Boots, my cousin Allen, my two sons, and I reached our base camp, the wooden lean-to where we would spend the night about halfway to the summit of Mount Washington, a mountain notorious for killing climbers.

A plaque in the ranger station keeps a running tally of the names of climbers killed on the mountain and of the causes of their deaths. Most climbers die from exposure, the consequence of being trapped on a mountain that creates its own weather systems. Two days before our climb, in a localized blizzard, a twin-engine plane smashed into the ridge of Huntington Ravine on the north side of Mount Washington, twenty-five feet below the top of the ridge. The rescue team said there wasn't a piece of the plane wreckage bigger than a toaster. We considered climbing up the ravine for a piece of the plane, but changed our minds when we thought about other things we might find.

We knew from the weather report in the ranger

station at the bottom of the mountain that the wind on the summit was blowing a steady eighty miles per hour with much higher gusts. Earlier in the week the high winds had swept the latest climbing victim off the ridge above our camp and dropped him to his death in the valley.

In the daylight remaining, Allen and I decided to scale Boot Spur, a steep rock slide rising about fifteen hundred feet above our campsite. With the water hissing on the camp stove, my brother pulled a box of Trivial Pursuit questions from his pack and began an impromptu game with my sons as Allen and I walked out of camp. We told them that if we were not back by nightfall not to come looking for us. If we were alive and remained, we joked, we would see them in the morning.

Never very athletic as a child, Allen, now a great bear of a man, walked among the rocks with a surprisingly quiet, studied grace. He strolled atop the cold stones as powerfully as a lumberjack and as effortlessly as a ballerina. In the late 1960's, my mother, sister, brother, and I lived with Allen's parents (our mothers are sisters) in New Hampshire for a year when my father went away to Vietnam. Allen married a French-speaking Vietnamese immigrant he met while in France and still works with his father at the family furniture store. When Allen isn't rock or ice climbing, he and his wife

take cycling tours back in France.

There is no trail up to Boot Spur, only the slick rockslide and a few signs to mark the trail head. We climbed recklessly up the chute, goaded on by the approaching darkness. We decided that, regardless of where we might be at the time, we would turn around in exactly half of the daylight left to us. Nearly an hour after we started the climb, with the timberline far below, the force of the wind sweeping over the top of the stony ridge surprised us as we crawled on our hands and knees from the rockslide onto the exposed spur.

Through the gray clouds the tall cairns marking the trail along the spur seemed more like ghosts than guardian angels, like stone sentinels haunting with heavy gothic madness a god-forgotten landscape. Happy these sentinels must be, I thought, to haunt such a place. I imagined that one could easily turn druid here.

Allen and I used both the glacial boulders and the leeward side of the ridge to protect us from the wind as we scrambled along the spur to a protected place directly below the final ascent to the summit. When we stuck our heads above the rocks, the eighty-miles-per-hour wind hit us full in the face with eighty-miles-per-hour clouds. Between the face of the ridge and some lichen-mantled boulders, we found a small patch of ripe blueberries. Huddled against the side of the rocks, we ate wild

blueberries, caught up on family gossip, and watched the clouds speed by. At exactly half-past the daylight remaining to us, we left the blueberries and returned to camp.

Overnight it rained, thundered, hailed, and snowed. I woke first, crawled from my warm sleeping bag, and walked from the shelter of the pine trees to divine the conditions of the trail and the summit. It had snowed about four inches while we slept, and the weather on top looked even worse than it had the day before.

Smoky clouds plunged over the lip of Tuckerman's Ravine in front of me, tumbling randomly into the gorge before being sucked up again to my left over Boot Spur. I could see the top of the ravine between breaks in the clouds but nothing beyond the lip of the ridge itself.

About 8:00 a.m. Allen, Boots, and I left the two boys in the lean-to with instructions to follow the trail down the mountain if we weren't back by 4:00 in the afternoon. I could accept the notion that I might be killed on the side of this mountain, but could not face Cheryl if one of the boys were to be seriously injured or lost while climbing a mountain that we didn't have to climb in weather reasonable people wouldn't have been climbing in. But hard climbing in bad weather makes for better stories. Anybody can climb in ideal conditions, we told ourselves.

* * *

I never feel more alive or physically able than when I'm spitting into the abyss. But, paradoxically, I cannot deliberately place my sons in danger without paralyzing anxiety. I'll stand in the yard while the tornado warning wails, hands in my jeans pockets, watching, mouth wide open in awe, as the wall cloud passes overhead. But last summer as I was in the field behind our house during just such a tornado warning, I looked over my shoulder and saw my older son, Bobby, standing on the peak of the house roof with the video camera.

"What are you, nuts?" I yelled to him, motioning for him to climb down from the roof and to go inside where it was safe.

And Michael, my younger son, has discovered that he enjoys making puddle angels. He lies on his back in a warm puddle on the asphalt--preferably during the storm--waving his arms and legs in the water as he watches the storm rage above him.

"You can't understand until you try it," he tells me.

The anxiety I feel about my own children's safety may be the product of my mother's curse. She told me she prayed at night that my brother and I would have children just like us so that we would know the hell we had put

her through. My brother circumvented her curse by not having children.

Yet otherwise, when fully clothed and in their right minds, my sons outwardly appear quite normal. I suppose that I do also.

During a blizzard two winters ago, Michael built a snow fort in the yard, covering the hole in the roof with a tattered summer bedspread. Then he lined the floor of the fort with plastic trash bags to keep out the moisture, spread out some blankets, and, over Cheryl's objections, settled in for the night. I barely slept at all, remembering my own boyhood snow forts and how often they caved in. But, because I had once tried it, I also understood his pleasure.

As a boy growing up in Maine, during blizzards I would strap on my snowshoes and head out alone into woods just for the terrifying solitude, knowing that if something went wrong I probably wouldn't be found until it was too late. I remember being so warm at times in the snowy woods that I wanted to fall asleep and, at other times, being so tired and cold that it would have been easier just to lie down in the snow than to fight my way home.

Michael wasn't in the house when I got up in the morning, so it was a great relief to find him still sleeping cozily in the fort, and to wake him, and to

invite him in for a warm breakfast.

* * *

Allen, Boots, and I reached the ridge line fairly easily by a less ambitious route than we would have used in better weather. But upon reaching the ridge we found that the wind and rime ice blew directly into our faces. Sometimes, as we stepped from one boulder to another, our stepping foot would hang in the air in spite of our severe lean into the wind. The situation became comical as well as dangerous as we stumbled along the exposed lower boulder field until making the gradual right turn up to the summit.

The climbing became easier as we crabbed up the final ascent with the wind on our left shoulders rather than in our faces. Within another hour we were standing on top of the mountain. A heavy layer of gravelly rime ice covered the summit and the stone out-buildings of the weather station. After taking hero photos, we started back down to the base camp.

I thought about Macbeth's witches as we began the long walk from the exposed ridges to the safety of the protected tree line:

Where shall we three meet again
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?
When the hurlyburly's done,
When the battle's lost and won.
That will be ere the set of sun.
Where the place?

Upon the heath.

We split up to go our separate ways at the bottom of the mountain, Allen to his home in New Hampshire and Boots and I to Maine. And we three have not met again.

Perhaps I require periodic privation and danger in order to appreciate the pleasures and security of home. Maybe to choose finally between home or heath is not to resolve the tension between my competing natures, which may not be in opposition at all, but desirable and complementary. The resolution, perhaps, is in the acceptance that both natures endow me with the stuff that is me.

The Reunion

"Parlez-vous Anglais?" I asked the stately-looking gentleman in the trench coat. He looked me over carefully before answering.

"I speak seven languages fluently," he said with obvious irritation.

"Then please tell me in the one that I understand," I pleaded with him, "how I get back to my hotel."

It was the first time Cheryl and I had been back to a reunion at Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, where she attended all four years of high school and I spent my last year and a half of high school after my father was transferred from Maine. Camp Lejeune being a major Marine Corps installation, one thing we returning students had in common is that we all had graduated from one of the few Department of Defense high schools remaining in the country. Since most of the graduates scatter to the four winds rather than remain in the local area, the school holds all-class reunions every five years.

Cheryl beamed as we pulled into the school parking lot. She had already begun to recapture the enthusiasm of her glory days as a cheerleader, student-council

president, and prom queen. I, on the other hand, having graduated with predictable mediocrity in the lower part of the third-fifth of our class, could only call up sour recollections of where I had resumed my downward academic spiral--failing French for a second year, recommencing my underachievement in algebra, and, then, for a third time, failing French.

* * *

The most unlikely of couples to be seen alone in the Officer's Club bar (the O'Club being the site for the reunion reception), a gorgeous former classmate and I sat across a cozy table from each other. I left Cheryl in the dining room chatting with some of her school friends. The woman with me, for the purposes of the reunion, abandoned her former fighter pilot, former airline pilot, currently unemployed husband back in California.

Many of us from Lejeune High had been children of officer fathers. And since most of our fathers had retired at least a decade ago, those of us who were not currently military officers ourselves (a handful of us were) were no longer eligible to patronize the club without a sponsor. Nevertheless, many of these former patrons-by-proxy still talked about the O'Club as if it were their private resort. On the other hand, for those of us who grew up with an enlisted father, it was our first visit.

"So, what are you doing with yourself these days?" I asked my former high school classmate from my seat across the table. A strikingly attractive woman, she only vaguely remembered me. Although it bothered me a little, her not recollecting my face or name seemed predictable since she had been but one girl of many who, twenty years before, would not give me the time of day, much less ever consider dating me. But now instead of being just an older rendering of a pretty teenager, she had become elegant--elegant in the mature way younger women can only hope to grow into. Flawless makeup. Perfectly arranged, shoulder-length brown hair. Stylish designer clothes. If she had a flaw, she was, perhaps, a little too round in the hips, but otherwise she had blossomed into the complete package of seasoned physical loveliness.

The program we were all following for the reunion weekend said that dinner would begin at the O'Club at six o'clock. Upon our arrival, however, the waitress in the dining room informed us that dinner could not possibly be ready until eight. To my surprise, the attractive woman followed me from where the hungry group had gathered in the dining room into the bar area, where, at least, we could take the edge off our hunger with appetizers.

"I'm a model," she said coyly from across the table. In spite of the warning bells and whistles going off in my head, I found myself responding politely to her

plastic charm. Not that I would be impolite, but it was apparent to me that this woman had grown accustomed to men fawning over her. Indeed, she expected it. The fact that I was polite but not fawning obviously bothered her.

The waitress came over to where we were seated.

"Can you make deliveries to the Louisiana Room?" I asked her.

"It's pretty busy tonight," she said. "I shouldn't leave the bar."

"It'll be worth it to you if you do," I offered as an incentive.

"What would you like?" she asked, raising her pen and order pad.

"One of everything on the appetizer menu. Make it two orders of potato skins. What's that come to?"

She took a moment to add the figures on her pad. "Thirty one dollars," she said.

I handed her two twenties, saying that I would not need change.

"Big spender," my new friend said, turning up the charm.

"I'm starving," I told her. "And it would be bad form, don't you think, to eat in front of everybody."

Instead of answering my obviously rhetorical question, my new friend reached into a stylish cloth bag at her feet, pulling out a hard-cover portfolio about the

size of a yearbook. The woman I saw in the thirty-or-so photos, advertisements, and magazine covers in the portfolio could not possibly have been more stunning. She paled the merely striking woman across the table from me. My first reaction to the pictures was, "These can't be you." Now, I wish I'd had the nerve to say that instead of the bumbling and sometimes toady comments I actually made. By the end of the weekend, after watching her tirelessly flash her smile and her portfolio around at every formal and informal event, I wanted to tell her, "You know, now that I've had a while to think it over, your butt doesn't look nearly so big in those pictures. Wanna read my Ph.D. dissertation?"

Cheryl says I'm bitter.

* * *

The reunion proved a staggering display of atrophy's withering mischief as well as the unequivocal transience of beauty and life. The most beautiful girls in school, like the rest of us, are rapidly approaching their fortieth birthday. All of them have begun to see their great beauty fade. "To whom much is given, much shall be required," the Proverb says. And these folks proved living illustrations of it.

In only twenty brief years, nature's entropic forces have noticeably ground the conspicuous muscles and taut flesh of youth into loose randomness. Even the least

loose and baggy among us could see the near future plainly as we gazed into the mirrors of our friends' faces. A former friend, once a talented athlete and student, the boy who stole my long-time girlfriend away from me, is on his second marriage. This wife made him get a nose job, have his teeth bonded, does not permit him to wear eyeglasses in public, and convinced a family friend (a pediatrician) to prescribe Ritalin for him because she thinks he has an attention-deficit disorder.

I was in for another shock. One of the most capable athletes and certainly one of the more popular guys with the women is an enormously fat guy now. In ways that boys measure manhood, the distance between the two of us had been immeasurable. I had imagined over the last twenty years that he had continued to gain ground on me. I not only wanted to be like him: I would have given anything to be him. What had happened to us? Perhaps I measure manhood differently these days, but I don't think so. After all, the model followed me to the bar, not him.

* * *

At the reception, Cheryl and I bumped into her former French teacher, Mrs. Morelli--Mademoiselli Morelli as we called her.

"You two were on that foreign study trip to Europe, weren't you?" she asked us.

"Yeah," I said. "The trip where we didn't sleep for two weeks."

"I slept," Cheryl said.

Mlle. Morelli turned her gaze to me. "You were the one who got lost in Paris."

"No, I didn't get lost," I said. "I snuck away at the Sacre Coeur tour to find Cheryl a chocolate Easter bunny out in town."

I revealed to our former teacher that as soon as our group had exited the bus at Sacre Coeur I mixed into the larger tourist crowd. Then, when everyone went inside the chapel, I took off down the hill to search the shops of Paris for a chocolate rabbit.

I had to hurry since there were only two hours until the bus went on to the next site, but I knew that I would not be missed by the chaperones until roll call when the bus departed Sacre Coeur. I had the disadvantage, though, of possessing no knowledge of this part of Paris, except the obvious certainty that any street on an incline would eventually lead me back to the bus.

"Avez-vous un lapin chocolat?" I inquired of the shopkeepers.

"Etes-vous Americain?" they all seemed to ask in response.

"Oui," I said.

"Non!" they said.

I should have learned after my first experience speaking French in the country never to think that I could ever effectively communicate in the language. On our first day in France, trying to impress the other students at my breakfast table, it seems that rather than asking the waiter for butter I requested from him a burro instead.

"Avez-vous de bur pour mon pain?" I haltingly inquired of the waiter.

"Burro?"

"Non, bur."

"Burro?" he asked again, this time making a gesture with his hands as if his ears were long.

"Bur. Bu-tter. Mar-ga-rrreene." I said, rolling my "r" and stressing the last syllable.

"Non, burro!" he said in disgust, never returning to our table.

Until an incident later in the week at the Louvre, I thought it was me personally and my bad French that aggravated the native population so much. The incident involved a very petite, very polite, very French-speaking young lady in our group who, as she walked past an exhibit, accidentally tripped over an elderly Frenchman's foot.

"Pardon," she said to the man.

He kicked her for her trouble.

In my search for the chocolate rabbit, a kindly lady

shopkeeper, one who didn't mind that I was *un Americain*--
un Americain who had, in fact, failed three straight
years of her sacred language--found for me *un lapin*
chocolat. And yet, Cheryl never ate her chocolate
present; instead, she kept it as a souvenir of our trip
and of my adventure, naming her sweet pet Pierre Lapin.

I returned to Paris on a military visit a few years
ago. In profanely wretched French, I informed the
incensed hotel laundry ladies that I would be eating my
blue dress shirt for dinner that night. "You don't learn
anything the second time the mule kicks you," we say in
our family.

* * *

People who had attended previous reunions were
surprised to see Cheryl and me. Many had been curious
over the years to learn what had become of us. Cheryl,
everyone correctly imagined, had so much potential, and I
so little. "Are you still in the Air Force," they all
seemed to ask, recalling that I had enlisted soon after
graduation.

"Yup. Still in," I would offer with feigned boredom
in my voice, hoping to God all the while that they would
want to know what rank I had attained and what I had
accomplished while gaining it.

It was not until I got back home that I understood
that I was no different from my model friend. Few of us

at the reunion really were, I suppose. We were all trying to prove to one another that we had not wasted the last twenty years. And if we had not accomplished great things ourselves, then our children were certainly bound for greatness. Moreover, the rumors we aided along about those who were not in attendance amply demonstrated our own private insecurities. We enthusiastically passed around reports that the all-state defensive end who joined the Marine Corps after college turned out to be a transvestite, and the senior-class beauty queen has spent the last five years in a California asylum.

And as for me, although I didn't have my modeling portfolio in my bag at the dinner, I did indeed have a draft of my dissertation in my briefcase back at the hotel. I had it along, I told myself, just in case my house burned down while I was away on this trip. But it had crossed my mind that I might be able to flash my dissertation around to some of my former classmates. In fact, if the truth be known, I wanted to broadcast to this whole gallery of unbelievers that eventually I had gone to college, earned an officer's commission, and would shortly be awarded a PhD. But instead of just brazenly hauling my glamour photos out of a cloth bag, I surreptitiously paraded my bag around, hoping someone would ask me, "What do you have in there?"

Half-Interest in a Harley

Many years ago, shortly after my paternal grandfather's funeral, my father confided to me that his father had never said to him that he loved him. That is the only time I can recall seeing my father cry. But my father's experience may be more common than he suspects. James Baldwin in "Notes of a Native Son" says of his relationship with his own father,

When he was dead I realized that I had hardly ever spoken to him. When he had been dead a long time I began to wish I had. It seems to be typical of life in America, where opportunities, real and fancied, are thicker than anywhere else on the globe, and the second generation has no time to talk to the first.

What would my father give for another opportunity to bridge the now unbridgeable gap between himself and his father? I have noticed that his recent efforts border on desperation as he tries to connect with my brother and me before his own death. He wrote on my older son's high school graduation card this simple but revealing message: "Family matters, Love Poppa." Like a note in a bottle tossed out among the waves, my father's terse message is

less for my son than for whoever takes the theme to heart.

* * *

In theory, my father and I are taking August off this year to ride our motorcycles out West. I will have completed my doctorate and he will be 61, both good excuses for a vacation. In practice, we'll see what happens. There are still too many variables to be factored into the equation before motorcycle rubber meets the holiday road.

Except for a brief time that he had a motorcycle in Japan, my father is a relative latecomer to motorcycling. He rides, but not for long distances anymore and not all that often. In fact, he complains that I put more miles on his bike when I am home than he puts on it between my visits.

"Where have you been?" he asked me when I pulled into the driveway after being gone for several hours on his bike.

"Ben & Jerry's," I said.

Later in the evening he said to me, "There's no Ben & Jerry's in town. The closest one is in Freeport."

"I know," I said.

Freeport is about an hour away from his home.

* * *

A career Marine, my father wrote to me from an

assignment in Japan when I was a young boy, saying that used motorcycles in his part of the world cost a dollar a cc--one dollar for every cubic centimeter of the engine displacement. He sent me pictures of a sporty little orange and white Honda 350 he had recently purchased. And true to regional economic custom, it cost him \$350.

I made big plans for that bike, which I never realized because he sold it rather than shipping it back to the States. Nevertheless, it served as the subject of many of our letters back and forth across the Pacific. Motorcycles have always served as a safe topic between us--a demilitarized zone where neither of us has to feel his way nervously around the minefields that many fathers and sons routinely navigate with mixed success.

A general rule in our family as I was growing up was that we could have a motorcycle when we could pay for half of it. As a parent, I have modified that rule somewhat: my sons can have a motorcycle when they can pay for all of it. I am not interested in teaching them a lesson in fiscal responsibility. I just don't want them riding motorcycles. Call me a hypocrite. My sons have, and I can live with it. Maybe I have stumbled onto why my dad sold the Honda 350 in Japan.

* * *

Like many kids with an interest in motorcycles, I began my two-wheeled adventures riding mini-bikes and

worked my way through dirt enduros to street-legal road machines. My early experiences riding ranged from falling off the side of a log bridge into a sewage ditch to a traffic-court appearance for getting caught on the road without a driver's license.

I had started across the narrow log bridge too slowly, and when the bike began to tip to the side, my foot missed the edge of the bridge when I put it down to keep the bike upright. As I fell backward I recall seeing the blue sky between my outstretched hands and feet--as if I were inverted and sitting on an invisible motorcycle--and feeling my heart thump in my chest, all the time watching my bike follow me as I dropped through the air.

I must have looked to my friends on the banks of the ditch like Wile E. Coyote tumbling over the edge of the canyon with the anvil intended for the Roadrunner in trail. First, in a silent puff of dust, Wile E. hits the canyon floor, and then, piling insult on top of injury, the anvil lands on Wile E.'s head.

I splashed rather than puffed, and then the world above me went black as raw sewage oozed inside my helmet and wrapped itself around my sinking head. Fortunately, rather than landing on my head like Wile E.'s anvil, my upside down bike, with its engine revving wildly, narrowly missed me as it plunged into the ditch.

Covered in sewage from head to toe, pushing my broken motorcycle up the street to our house, I must have looked like someone who needed yelling at, because my mom let me have it when I got home. My dad just laughed and hosed me off in the yard before allowing me inside the house.

A few years after my father returned from Vietnam, I was arrested for illegally riding my motorcycle in the road. As the Marine Corps recruiter for the area, officed in the Post Office across the street from the court house, Dad worked hand-in-glove with the local police officers and the county judge, "Blacky" Martin.

Judge Martin would often give boys only a few years older than me an opportunity to keep their police records clean by permitting them to leave town. In no uncertain terms he would inform these budding desperados that they could either go to jail immediately or enlist in the military with equal dispatch. The Marine Corps often profited from Judge Martin's judicial benevolence.

On the morning of my court date, Dad dropped me off in front of the county court house.

"Come by the office when you get done," he said as he pulled up to the curb and gestured for me to get out of the car.

"You're not coming in with me?" I asked. I had assumed all along that he would. Dad looked terrific in

his uniform and had used my court appearance not only to get my long hair cut off but also to dress me up in slacks, a sport coat, and tie. He was aware, as I was, that his presence would ensure me better treatment than I would get otherwise.

"No. I've got stuff to do," he said.

It was only then that I began to realize that he had never planned to go to court with me.

"Drunk and disorderly, third offense," the judge said. "Ninety days and time served. Next case."

"Driving with a suspended license. Resisting arrest. Thirty days. Next case."

I didn't know it until late that evening, but, in addition to making me go to court alone, my father had rigged it so that mine would be the last case of the day.

"Robert E. Poliquin, Jr. Operating a motor vehicle without a license. Operating an unregistered motor vehicle. Operating a motorcycle without a helmet. How do you plead?"

Guilty as sin, your honor.

Blacky advised me that I was headed to reform school if I showed up in his court again.

"What are you in for?" I imagined myself asking my bunkmate.

"Robbing a gas station. You?"

"Riding my dirt bike in the road."

Somehow, in spite of Judge Martin's warning, I couldn't envision reform school in my future.

In fact, I did get caught on the road a second time. I didn't actually get physically captured because the police car couldn't follow me into the woods as I veered off the road and onto a trail. But by this time in my teenage life it was no secret to the police where I lived, and the policeman was standing in my front yard, chatting with my father when I got home.

"Did he tell you to stop?" my father asked me.

"Yes, sir."

"What did you do?"

"I ran away."

"What have I told you?"

"Never run away from the police."

I knew the drill by heart.

My dad looked over at the young police officer.

"I'll take care of this one," he growled.

The cop seemed completely satisfied. "Yes, sir. I believe you will" was all he said.

* * *

My father has wanted a Harley for a while, but refuses to fork over the cash for one. I made him an offer last year that I thought he couldn't pass up. I proposed that we go halves on a new one. He could keep it where he lives in Maine for the first five years, and

I would take it for the next five years wherever I happened to be--and so on.

We both knew full well that he probably would not want it back again at age 70, but that, at least, he would have it for the years he is still fully able to ride. It was not a bad deal for either of us, especially so for me since he doesn't ride that often and takes neurotic care of the motorcycle he has now. Therefore, eventually, I would be getting a practically new Harley for half-price.

Yet, much of what I was attempting with my offer to pay for half of the Harley had more to do with our relationship than with motorcycles. We have returned, it seems, in his later years to the familiar safe haven where we can still walk about without tension, both searching again for a way to connect after a rocky start and a strained go, struggling to become and remain connected so that there are no regrets for either of us when the inevitable happens.

Yet, in spite of both of our efforts, we failed to agree on a specific bike to purchase together, so I went ahead and bought a sleek black Harley on my own. When I told my father what I had done, after reminding me how often I had ridden his motorcycle when I was home, he said, "You owe me about 600 miles, you know."

"I know," I said.

* * *

When we were children, my father told my sister, my brother, and me that he rode with Cochise, the great Apache chief. And when we closed our eyes and chanted the magic words he told us to say, he made chocolate-chip cookies magically appear in a sealed plastic container atop a living room hassock. He could even cause a wilted campfire to burst into life simply by passing a hand over the dying embers.

Even though I have come to understand the chronological impossibility of his historical claim, I can still plainly see with my child's eye my father riding his horse across the desert Southwest. And although I know that the loud, prayerful chants he taught us masked the sound of his pouring store-bought cookies into the container and that gunpowder sifted through his clenched fingers onto the red embers, he successfully constructed an unforgettable persona for us. The father I have pictured in my mind is no less real to me than the one who walks the earth. I have seen him ride with Cochise. And I was there when he baked cookies from prayerful wishes and when he made fire.

* * *

We have a tradition in our Franco-Catholic family where every January 1st the male children ask our father's blessing for the coming year. When I called Dad

for his blessing this year, he said, "I don't think you understand how important doing this is to me." And he's right; I guess I really don't. But with great emotion and graciousness he blessed me, my wife, and my children. After my dad's blessing I read to him the memories I had recently recorded about Cochise, the cookies, and the fire.

"We had some good times, didn't we," he said.

I agreed with him that we had.

Then he added, "I think we should forget about the bad times."

Those few words spoke volumes to both of us. And in the time it took him to speak them we agreed, he and I, to forget the bad times. We also decided on the phone that morning that, God willing, in the summer, the two of us will take a long motorcycle trip together.

"That's something I've always wanted to do," he told me. "And I'd like to do it with you."

His blessing had begun to take hold.